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# Perceived Impact of Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) on Marital Satisfaction

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# Walden University

College of Social and Behavioral Sciences

This is to certify that the doctoral dissertation by

Angel Pierce

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects, and  
that any and all revisions required by  
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University

2016

Abstract

Perceived Impact of Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) on

Marital Satisfaction by

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MA, University of Nevada, Reno, 2000

BS, Austin Peay State University, 1997

Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

General Psychology

Walden University

July 2016

## Abstract

Married couples often face serious issues that require them to make difficult decisions in their relationships. Many couples turn to marital counseling as a means to improve the marriage. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the experiences of heterosexual married individuals who participated in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) and how they felt their participation had influenced their perceived satisfaction in their marriages. The theoretical framework that guided this study was social exchange theory, which is a basis for thinking about the influence individuals have on each other in personal relationships. The research questions in this study addressed the experiences of individuals in PREP and the subsequent impact on marital satisfaction. This qualitative phenomenological study was used to better understand the individuals' experiences through interviews with 10 married individuals who were selected using criterion sampling. Data analysis included reading transcripts, coding, labeling, and interpreting the experiences. The results of this study revealed that communication and conflict resolution had an impact on marital satisfaction and extended support and supplemental programs influenced the experiences of the participants. The implications for positive social change relate to improved communication between married couples that may result in lasting improvements in their marriages. Others can learn from these experiences to create further positive change. Counselors could provide support outside of class and provide a supplemental program in order to improve the experience, possibly increase marital satisfaction, and decrease the likelihood of divorce.

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## Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my husband and best friend, Colby Pierce, and my four children, Camren, Christian, Carrington, and Alexandria, for your continuous love, support, encouragement, patience, and sacrifice. I am so blessed to have you all in my life and for you to take this journey along with me. The completion of this journey is an accomplishment for all of us. I love you more than words can express. My whole life, heart, and soul belongs to you.

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The completion of my research would not have been possible without the support, love, and patience from a number of people who never left my side throughout this process. It is important that I extend my gratitude to the many people who played a significant role in allowing me to achieve my goals.

I would first like to thank God for giving me the strength and determination to complete my Ph.D. when I wanted to quit. Finally reaching the end of this process is truly a blessing and could not have been done without the love, support, and favor shown to me by God.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

### **Introduction**

Marriage counseling focuses on the role of an individual's mindset and attitude along with the dysfunctional patterns that are presented in the relationship (Carlson, Krumholz, & Snyder, 2013). The strength of a marriage depends upon how well couples handle the different stages of the marriage. Thus a healthy marriage involves the successful negotiation of both expected and unexpected individual and relational challenges (Carlson et al., 2013). The proposed study provided an understanding of the lived experiences of individuals who are married and who had participated in Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). An understanding of how participation in PREP may increase marital satisfaction was also gained as a result of the proposed study. There was a lack of literature available that provided an understanding of the experiences as described in the stories told by individual participants about the effects of PREP. The PREP program was chosen as the counseling program for the proposed study because PREP is a psycho-educational preventive intervention that teaches couples the skills and principles associated with a healthy and happy relationship (Markman, Stanley, & Blumberg, 2010). The PREP program provides tools to help create and maintain happy relationships which are beneficial to understanding married individuals' perceived feelings of marital satisfaction that will be explored in the proposed study. The PREP program was created to be the industry leader in research-based couples' education (Markman et al., 2010). It is designed to increase the chances of happiness in marriage and lower the odds of divorce (Markman et al., 2010). The overall emphasis of PREP is

to reduce the risk factors and strengthen protective factors that research has indicated are related to positive marital outcomes (Markman et al., 2010). This chapter included a detailed discussion of the background of the study, statement of the problem, research questions, purpose of the study, theoretical framework, operational definitions, assumptions, limitations, scope and delimitations, and the significance of the study.

### **Background**

Even with multiple community resources available to married couples, the United States continuously has the highest divorce rate in the world (Wingert, 2009). According to researchers, the current divorce rate is 35% (Emery, 1999; Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2009)). There are about 850,000 divorces in the United States every year (Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2010).

The dissolution of a marriage is a process that begins before attorney consultations and extends beyond when the legal decrees are finalized (Blaisure & Saposnek, 2007). In fact, Amato and Rogers (1997) found that couples who eventually divorce report an elevated number of problems as early as 9 to 12 years prior to dissolution. Thus, marital counseling provides an important opportunity for couples who are struggling in their relationships, but have not yet reached the point of termination.

The key explanation for why people marry is the affective value of marriage (Billari & Liefbroer, 2009). Emotions linked to marriage are therefore the key factor that explains the presence, and potentially the future, of marriage (Billari & Liefbroer, 2009). Socialization, as well as biological and social-structural factors affect these emotions

(Billari & Liefbroer, 2009). Couples decide to marry for the presence of positives and divorce for the presence of negatives or the absence of positives (Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, Ragan, & Whitton, 2010). When a couple divorces, some of the reasons given include not enough commitment, too much conflict, infidelity, and growing apart (Markman, Rhoades et al., 2010). Marital intervention programs have been designed to prevent the demise of marriages and provide an opportunity for individuals to effectively address these issues with their spouses before the breakup of the marriage.

The counseling program that I used to examine through this study is PREP. There was a need to know more about how individuals experience PREP and how participation in PREP potentially increased marital satisfaction. The PREP program consists of lessons that cover topics related to decreasing risk factors (e.g. recognizing communication danger signs that threaten relationship safety, learning communication and conflict management skills, learning problem-solving skills) and increasing protective factors (e.g. fun, friendship, commitment, support, sensuality) (Markman et al., 2010). The PREP program also covers the importance of safety in marriage, including safety when talking about important issues (e.g. talking without fighting about relationship problems) and safety from physical harm (Markman et al., 2010). In addition to teaching communication and conflict management skills, PREP also focuses on helping couples deepen their commitment to each other (Markman et al., 2010). The use of the PREP counseling program as a model helped to provide an understanding of the

experiences of heterosexual married individuals who participate in the PREP program.

This program could also augment other helping approaches.

The PREP program is most effective with individuals who are highly motivated to have a successful marriage and who are tired of marital stagnation (Markman et al., 2010). Ideal individuals are also those who are ready to make positive changes in their relationships outside of the counseling environment and who are flexible with themselves and each other (Markman et al., 2010). Individuals who have tried other forms of intervention with little success and can focus mainly on themselves for change will benefit greatly from this intervention. Individuals who are least suited for the PREP program are those who are not equally committed to making their marriage work, those who are clinically depressed, physically aggressive individuals, couples who are dealing with substance abuse, and couples fixed on gender roles and expectations (Markman et al., 2010). In this study I sought to understand the experiences of heterosexual married individuals who participated in PREP. I additionally explored the individual's perceived feelings of marital satisfaction.

The potential social change implication for this study was that the findings would provide insight toward improving the effectiveness of the current PREP program, and the development and implementation of future PREP programs by understanding the experiences of the participants. Chapter 2 included a detailed discussion of literature related to couples' participation in PREP.



### **Statement of the Problem**

The phenomenon of the increased divorce rate for married couples in the United States in recent years has received much attention and research. Researchers have shown that there is a higher rate of relationship dysfunction and distress than ever before (Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009). The consistently high divorce rate signifies that many married couples are unsatisfied with their relationships (Doss et al., 2009). The high rate of divorce makes it more important to provide as many married individuals as possible with effective marital counseling. While the potential importance of effective marital counseling is known, the gap in the literature was understanding and describing the experiences of the individuals who participated in PREP and how they reported their perceived marital satisfaction. The proposed study explored the experiences of 10 individuals who are married and who participated in PREP. The PREP program is a counseling program used for couples seeking to implement tools in their relationships to foster marital satisfaction. I used PREP in the proposed study to understand the experiences of married individuals and their perceived feelings of marital satisfaction because PREP is a program that encourages married individuals to commit to effective communication and realistic expectations. The information gained through the proposed study was important for understanding how heterosexual married individuals experienced PREP and the perceived effects of participation on marital satisfaction.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to understand and describe the experiences of heterosexual married individuals who participated in PREP. I also

explored how these married individuals perceived the effect of participation in PREP on satisfaction in their marriages. I conducted interviews with 10 heterosexual married individuals who had participated in PREP within the last year. The interviews provided an understanding of their experiences in PREP through telling their own stories. The individuals' stories provided a greater understanding of how their experiences in PREP influenced their communication skills, beliefs, and expectations about marriage. The information gained from the participants provided an understanding of the significance of PREP counseling program for heterosexual married individuals. The findings were useful in filling the literature gap in this area, which was understanding and describing the experiences of the individuals who participated in PREP and how they perceived marital satisfaction. A more detailed discussion of the research methodology is presented in Chapter 3.

### **Research Questions**

There are two research questions addressed in this phenomenological study that helped understand the experiences of the married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling.

1. How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their experience in PREP?
2. How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their marital satisfaction?

### **Theoretical Framework**

The theory that framed this study was the social exchange theory (SET). The SET provides a broad narrative of how people interact and make decisions within relationships, as well as outside of partnerships and groups (Miller & Bermudez, 2004). Social exchange theory has become one of the more prominent theories of the family sciences (Miller & Bermudez, 2004). Individuals decide to enter into and maintain a relationship based on their perceived benefits and costs in the relationship. Partners select relationships by assessing the degree to which relationships provide the most benefit and the least cost for each individual (Miller & Bermudez, 2004). In other words, individuals seek mates who possess characteristics that they value or find rewarding. All partners seek to provide mutual benefit by offering their partner the characteristics they believe the other individual in the relationship values. When both partners in the relationship believe they have received the benefits that they deserve, they have achieved mutual benefit in the relationship. The SET provides guidelines for the cost and reward exchange between individuals in a relationship. The SET includes parameters for determining whether the exchange was rewarding or costly to the individuals in the partnership. It further investigates how the perception of benefits relates to satisfaction within the relationship.

The SET, like PREP, addresses the importance of effective communication, conflict resolution, and realistic expectations in a relationship. The goal of the SET is to explain and maintain relationship satisfaction by individuals effectively communicating their needs and expectations for his or her relationship. The SET related to this study by

examining relationship exchanges and individual perception of marital satisfaction. A detailed discussion of the SET is discussed in Chapter 2.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used the phenomenological method in this qualitative study. The phenomenological method seeks to explore, describe, and understand the meaning of the lived experience of the individual from the perspective of the participant (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). I chose the phenomenological method because my intention in the proposed study was to explore and understand the experiences of the individuals who participated in the PREP marital counseling program. The objective of the proposed study was to understand the experiences of the participants in PREP and how they perceived marital satisfaction.

In this study, I explored the experiences of 10 heterosexual married individuals who had participated in PREP. I interviewed individuals separately so the participants felt comfortable and open speaking honestly about their experiences in PREP and their perceived marital satisfaction.

I used the criterion sampling method to locate 10 participants (Patton, 2001). In-depth interviews were the primary data collection tool used. I invited individuals who are married and who had participated in PREP within the last year to participate in the study. The participants could not be married to other participants in the study. Each interview was audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim. I coded the data by sorting

themes related to their common experiences and the perception of the effects on marital satisfaction. Methods for the study are further discussed in Chapter 3.

### **Operational Definitions**

*Bracketing:* A method used in qualitative research to mitigate the potentially deleterious effects of preconceptions that may taint the research process (Tufford & Newman, 2012).

*Divorce rate:* The rate that measures the frequency of marriage and divorce (U.S. National Center for Health Statistics, 2013).

*Marital dissatisfaction:* An unhappy and unstable marriage that is more likely to experience divorce (Sullivan, 2001).

*Marital satisfaction :* A happy and stable marriage that is less likely to experience divorce (Sullivan, 2001).

*Married couple:* A couple who has the capacity to enter into a legal contract and mutually promises to live together in the relationship of husband and wife in law for life or until the legal termination of the relationship (West's Encyclopedia of American Law, 1998).

*Meaning units:* Extracted from the transcribed text during the coding process. They are the listed statements that are taken from the individual participants' perspectives by using specific quotations (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

*Negative communication:* Includes negative affect, denial, dominance, conflict, withdrawal, and negative escalation that negatively influence relationships (Markman,

Rhoades et al., 2010).

*Positive communication:* Includes positive affect, problem-solving skills, support/validation, and communication that positively influence relationships (Markman, Rhoades et al., 2010).

*PREP:* A psycho-educational preventive intervention that teaches couples the skills and principles associated with a healthy and happy relationship (Markman et al., 2010).

*Social exchange theory:* Explores interpersonal transactions in relationships by assessing perceived costs and rewards (Miller & Bermudez, 2004).

### **Assumptions**

Every research study in psychology requires assumptions. One assumption was that the participants were willing and able to describe their experiences in PREP honestly and accurately. A second assumption was that the interview was an appropriate method to use in order to gather data. Finally, it was assumed that participants were willing and able to accurately report how they felt PREP had affected their perception of marital satisfaction.

### **Scope and Delimitation**

The divorce rate has consistently increased, which means that people are increasingly dissatisfied in their marriages (Doss et al., 2009). The increase in the divorce rate has encouraged individuals to seek marital counseling (Doss et al., 2009). The proposed study focused on understanding the experiences of heterosexual married individuals who had participated in PREP. This study focused only on PREP; therefore,

findings cannot transfer to all marital counseling programs. Due to the specific predetermined criteria for participant selection, findings cannot be generalized to individuals in same sex marriages or individuals who have been divorced or remarried. This study was also specific to married individuals who are in first marriages and who had participated in PREP within the last year.

### **Limitations**

There are always limitations to the design and therefore, the results, in social science research. A limitation that was considered was that the results of this study cannot be generalized to individuals who are not married or who had not participated in PREP. Further, it is possible that couples in their second or later marriages may experience PREP differently than those in their first marriage, so the inclusion of only married individuals who are in the first marriage was another limitation on the ability to generalize findings. Since the participants included only heterosexual married individuals, the findings of the proposed study are limited to the experiences of heterosexual married individuals. The participants could not be married to other participants in the study. The phenomenological design presented a limitation in terms of broader quantitative assessment of understanding the experiences of the participants and their feelings of marital satisfaction. However, it is believed that the richness of the qualitative approach is an important contribution to the existing literature that goes beyond what a quantitative study could provide (Lancy, 1993). Finally, the findings of

this study are limited to the data collected from the interviews, and to some extent, the researcher's interpretation.

### **Significance of the Study**

In this study, I attempted to provide an understanding of the experiences of individuals who are married and who participated in PREP. Little was known about the experiences of married individuals who participate in PREP. The study added to an existing body of literature about PREP by adding a qualitative perspective that examined and described how participants felt PREP had affected marital relationships. An understanding of how heterosexual married individuals experience PREP helped to improve program content. With data from the proposed study, PREP counselors have a better understanding of how the participants experience PREP. One implication for positive social change was the use of study data by counselors and family therapists to improve the design and implementation of the PREP program. By improving the program, therapists and counselors are able to use PREP as another preventive educational program that can help to increase marital satisfaction for those who participate in the program.

### **Summary of Chapter 1**

The theoretical framework that guided this study was the SET, which compares perceived benefits by assessing the costs and rewards in interpersonal relationships. PREP was the marital counseling program that was explored in the study. The PREP marital counseling program provided an understanding of the experiences of the individuals who participated in the program and also how they perceived marital



satisfaction (Markman et al., 2010). Research has determined that effective communication plays a significant role in marital satisfaction (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). In this study, I sought to uncover the experiences of heterosexual married individuals who participated in PREP, as well as explore their feelings of marital satisfaction. The results are valuable in making PREP more effective, thereby reducing the divorce rate and resulting in positive social change. This chapter is followed by a review of the pertinent literature in Chapter 2

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### Introduction

In this study, I provided an understanding of the experiences of the married individuals who participated in PREP and their perceived feeling of marital satisfaction. I provided insight into the participants' experiences that will assist counselors and therapists in future improvement and implementation of PREP. Researchers have shown that more couples are unsatisfied with their marriage than ever before (Doss et al., 2009). The increase in the rate of unsatisfied couples has influenced the increase in the rate of divorce in the United States to currently 35% (Emery, 1999; Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2009). There are many reasons why couples choose to divorce, such as lack of communication and infidelity (Markman, Rhoades et al., 2010). Effective marital counseling may assist in lowering the high rate of divorce.

Marital counseling provides tools to participating couples that will help them to maintain a successful marital environment (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Such programs educate couples on effective interactions, communications, and relations with one another (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). As a result, couples seek marital counseling programs for two reasons: intervention and prevention (Bagarozzi, Bagarozzi, Anderson, & Pollane, 1984). Couples who seek marital counseling programs for the purpose of intervention are in immediate need of answers that will help them get through difficult times; couples who seek marital counseling programs for preventive needs are preparing for long-term success (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). These couples tend not to be in any immediate need but are in search of tools to prevent future marital difficulties (Markman &

Hahlweg, 1993). While the effectiveness of marital counseling for those who participate is known, it was unclear what the individuals who participated in PREP experience. The purpose of the proposed phenomenological study was to understand and describe the experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP and their perceived feeling of satisfaction in their marriages.

Chapter 2 began with significant research of the SET, which was the theoretical framework that guided the proposed study. I explored in this literature review the implementation of marital counseling programs as they related to correlates of marital satisfaction. This literature review also provided (a) an understanding of how PREP has been implemented in the past and is currently used to provide effective tools for married individuals who participate in this program, and (b) current trends in PREP and point out gaps in the literature. The major sections of Chapter 2 include an introduction, research strategy, detailed literature review and the summary of the chapter.

### **Research Strategy**

The database used to locate the literature was PsychInfo and the following keywords were used: “*marriage,*” “*prevention,*” “*intervention,*” “*marital therapy,*” “*enrichment,*” “*counseling,*” “*Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP),*” “*social exchange theory,*” “*friendship,*” “*marital satisfaction,*” “*conflict resolution,*” “*relationship expectations,*” “*unrealistic beliefs,*” “*effective communication,*” and “*help-seeking.*” Hundreds of articles matched the keywords listed but I selected articles based on whether the articles were recent and enhanced the literature review of the study. I found all of my research articles using the keywords

listed above. I used the research for the proposed study to explore various marital counseling programs, including PREP and the SET.

### **Review of the Literature**

Married individuals experience counseling in many different ways which impact their level of satisfaction within their marriage. The following literature review provided an understanding of preventive and intervention marital counseling, PREP and marital satisfaction, conflict resolution, unrealistic beliefs, effective communication, expectations, friendship, and the SET.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study was largely based on the SET which has been most effectively used in the marriage and family literature to explain mate selection and relationship formation or dissolution process (Miller & Bermudez, 2004). SET suggests that “individuals evaluate current relationships (either consciously or subconsciously) by comparing the perceived benefits of the relationship (rewards) to the perceived costs” (Osborn, 2012, p. 740). According to Miller and Bermudez (2004), two classifications of characteristics determine rewards and costs in a relationship. One classification is *endogenous determinants*, which explores the characteristics of the relationship itself; for example, the amount of cohesiveness or conflict in a relationship and the degree to which each individual enjoys the other’s company (Miller & Bermudez, 2004). The other characteristic is *exogenous determinants* of benefits and costs, which explore the characteristics of the individual, for example the individual’s personality characteristics, age, and educational level (Miller & Bermudez, 2004). According to Miller and

Bermudez (2004), “Social exchange theory explores interpersonal transactions that cause human beings to behave in certain ways within relationships” (p.27).

When social exchange occurs, the benefits each person receives compared to the benefits the other receives can be equal or unequal (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Men and women who perceived the relationship as inequitable were more distressed than those who perceived the relationship as equitable. According to Nakonezny and Denton (2008), individuals who feel that they contribute less to the relationship than their partner try to give more to the relationship and the individuals who feel that they contribute more to the relationship than their partner try to increase the amount of the partner’s input to the relationship. When partners feel that they are experiencing equal benefit in the relationship, they tend to be more satisfied with their relationship (Sprecher, 2001). Relationship satisfaction occurs when the perceived outcomes (rewards minus costs) of the relationship outweigh one’s expectations for the relationship which is known as one’s *comparison level* (Rusbult, 1980).

The comparison level is determined by an individual’s past experiences in similar relationships, perception of rewards received by others, and general expectations for relationships of that type (Osborn, 2012). In other words, the comparison level is simply known as the expectations that individuals have in relationships. Each individual’s attraction to the relationship varies directly with the perceived rewards of the marital relationship and inversely with the perceived costs (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008). Hence, married individuals evaluate the attractiveness of their relationship subjectively in which the “perceived rewards and costs experienced in the relationship are weighed and then

combined to determine the net profit yielded by participation in the marital relationship” (Nakonezny & Denton, 2008, p. 408). A marital relationship is more likely to have harmony if both individuals in the relationship perceive the outcomes above the comparison level.

The *commitment level* explores the extent to which relationship satisfaction outweighs the attractiveness of alternatives to the current relationship (Osborn, 2012). The alternatives include relationships with others as well as not being a relationship. According to the commitment level, commitment to a relationship is high as long as satisfaction with the present relationship outweighs the attractiveness of the alternatives which is one of the strengths of the SET. According to Osborn (2012), the SET offers “viable explanations for both relationships in which commitment remains high in spite of low satisfaction (due to lack of alternatives) and relationships in which satisfaction is high but commitment is not (because of highly attractive alternatives)” (p. 743). According to Nakonezny and Denton (2008), the rewards and punishments that partners administer to each other is a principal source of marital power. The commitment level to the relationship determines marital power. In other words, the partner with the least commitment has the greatest power and the balance of power belongs to the partner who contributes the greatest resources to the marriage.

Social exchange theory was used as a framework in a study about television watching in relationships. The study included 392 married individuals who were recruited using a nonprofit, academic service that provides adult research participants to researchers in the social services. Participants completed measures of romantic

relationship expectations (comparison levels), satisfaction with their current relationship, commitment to the relationship, perceived rewards/costs of the relationship, belief in television portrayals of romantic relationships, and viewing frequency measures for several genres of television programming.

Within the SET framework, relationship portrayals on television represent an additional influence on relationship expectations (the comparison level) which means in addition to being affected by past relationship experiences and perceptions of rewards obtained by others, expectations are likely affected by television's depictions of relationships (Osborn, 2012). If individuals watch programs that create an idealized view of relationships, the individual will tend to have higher expectations and thus lower satisfaction and commitment to the relationship, however if the television programs create a more negative view of relationships, the opposite pattern would be expected (Osborn, 2012). Social exchange theory suggests that television viewing should be associated with actual assessments of individual relationship satisfaction and commitment through its impact on expectations (Osborn, 2012). The results indicated that there are stark differences between satisfaction and commitment as well as between costs and rewards with respect to the television measures. Neither viewing nor belief showed any association with satisfaction or expected rewards. Both television measures were correlated with higher expected costs, higher perceived costs, greater perceived alternative quality, and lower commitment. According to the results, satisfaction and commitment are not equal and are not necessarily affected by the same factors in one's environment. Social exchange theory was a beneficial framework for this study because

costs, rewards, satisfaction, commitment, and alternative quality were separated otherwise significant effects could have been masked (Osborn, 2012).

A longitudinal study was conducted using SET as the theoretical framework exploring the importance of equity in predicting relationship satisfaction, commitment, and stability, but its importance is assessed relative to other social exchange variables (rewards, investments, and comparison level for alternatives) (Sprecher, 2001). The participants consisted of 101 dating couples who were mostly university undergraduate students and were recruited through the student newspaper and posters around the campus. There are four purposes that Sprecher (2001) has for the study: (a) To examine the unique association of equity with commitment and satisfaction, relative to rewards, investment, and comparison level for alternatives, (b) to examine whether equity predicts change in satisfaction and commitment over time, (c) to test the reverse causal direction between equity and relationship quality (whether inequity arise out of relationship inequity), and (d) to examine the degree to which equity predicts the stability of the relationship. In this study, equity refers to the “perceived balance in the partners’ contributions and outcomes” (Sprecher, 2001, p. 602). An individual feels underbenefited in a relationship if he or she contributes more but receives less than his or her partner. Overbenefiting occurs when an individual contributes less but receives more than his or her partner. Both inequities cause distress but according to Sprecher (2001) underbenefiting inequity is more distressing. Equity, rewards, and investments were assessed throughout the study. Participants were asked to indicate how rewarding their partner’s contributions have been in seven resource areas (love, status, money, material



goods, services, knowledge, and sex). The participants were then asked to indicate how much they had invested in each of the seven resource areas. Then they were asked to indicate the degree to which the exchange in each of the seven resource areas was fair or unfair. According to Sprecher (2001), underbenefiting inequity was found to be associated negatively with both satisfaction and commitment, for both genders. Rewards showed more importance than equity in predicting relationship quality, especially for women (Sprecher, 2001). Investments were generally correlated significantly and positively with commitment for both genders (Sprecher, 2001). According to Li and Fung (2011), in marriage there should be a balanced division of household labor, such as housework, raising children, and finances. In a marriage where couples feel that the relationship is satisfactory, both individuals believe that the instrumental goals have been met (Li & Fung, 2011). An unfair division of household labor contributed to conflict (Frisco & Williams, 2003; Lavee & Katz, 2002; Wilkie, Ferree, & Ratcliff, 1998).

Marital satisfaction is dependent on whether the marital goals, especially the prioritized goals, are met. According to Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, and Fletcher (2001), marital satisfaction is determined by whether marital expectations or needs are met.

I used the SET in this study as the theoretical framework that provided an understanding of the experiences of individuals who participated in the PREP program and how they perceived marital satisfaction after participation in PREP.

The PREP program is the specific form of counseling that was explored in the proposed study. The SET aligns with the PREP approach in that PREP provides tools to address effective communication and relationship expectations between individuals in a

relationship (Markman et al., 2010). As with the SET, PREP also focuses on teaching conflict management skills, confronting and dealing with issues in the relationship, and creating and maintaining a healthy and happy relationship (Markman et al., 2010).

Further, the focus of PREP is on the negatives with the aim of decreasing marital distress and divorce from a prevention perspective.

### **Correlates of Marital Satisfaction**

#### **Effective Communication in Marital Counseling**

The PREP program participants are taught what ineffective communication is and are provided with the tools to communicate effectively (Markman et al., 2010). Couples who seek marital counseling report lack of effective communication as the main reason for therapy (Li, Yu-Fen, Nelson, & Daniel, 2008). Therefore, it is imperative to use some form of communication skills training in all marital counseling programs (Li et al., 2008). Research was conducted using a metaphor for couples to wear one hat at a time, called “The Six Thinking Hats” (Li et al., 2008). The goal of this technique was to assist with effective problem-solving (Li et al., 2008). During counseling, everyone in the room must think from the perspective of the particular hat that is being worn (Li et al., 2008). Everyone wearing the same color hat allows others to explore the situation from that perspective. Everyone then removes that hat and then puts on another color hat to explore another facet of the problem (Li et al., 2008). “When couples wear the same hat, their thinking is aligned with each other” (Li et al., 2008, p. 257). This process allows the couples to creatively come up with solutions. The goal of this method is “to demonstrate how many considerations each person can put forward under each respective hat” (Li et

al., 2008, p. 257). With this goal in mind, couples are encouraged to be more effective communicators (Li et al., 2008). This study provided communication skills training that couples could adapt to their relationships to increase effective communication (Li et al., 2008).

**Relationship beliefs.** Effective communication is not the only means of determining long-lasting marital relationships. Individual beliefs about marriage play a significant role in the success of marriage (Abowits, Knox, & Zusman, 2009). Men and women have different beliefs about romantic relationships. A study was conducted in order to gain a better understanding of the points of consensus and disagreement that shape young men's and women's journeys on the road to "happily ever after." (Abowits et al., 2009). The study presented 326 undergraduate women and men with an anonymous questionnaire designed to assess their beliefs about men, women, and relationships (Abowits et al., 2009). The findings in this study suggested that men were more likely to believe that cohabitation improves marriage, that bars are a good place to meet a potential mate, that men control relationships, and that people will cheat if they feel they will not be caught (Abowits et al., 2009). In contrast, women were significantly more likely to believe that love is more important than factors like age and race in choosing a mate, that couples stop "trying" after they marry, and that women know when their men are lying (Abowits et al., 2009). If individuals take these unrealistic beliefs into their marriages, they could potentially create an environment where the partner feels dissatisfied (Abowits et al., 2009).

Many people have unrealistic, romantic beliefs and expectations about marriage prior to becoming married. Unrealistic relationship beliefs are based on inaccurate expectations.

One factor contributing to the high divorce rate that has changed over time is marital expectations (Campbell & Wright, 2008). According to Campbell and Wright (2008), young people today have higher expectations for marriage than in the past. An optimistic outlook on marriage should exert a protective influence by suppressing any doubts about the relationship and rousing greater efforts to overcome relationship difficulties (Neff & Geers, 2013). On the contrary, if expectations are sufficiently unfavorable, spouses may reduce their coping efforts or even disengage from the relationship entirely (Gordon & Baucom, 2009). Some researchers have indicated that highly optimistic expectancies can beget poor outcomes by creating a context in which problems are left unresolved, and thus grow more severe over time (Dillard, Midboe, & Klein, 2009). It appears clear that couples who have unrealistic beliefs and expectations about relationships and who are dissatisfied with their marriages are at greater risk of seeking divorce without the tools necessary to help them cope effectively with difficult times. When relational uncertainty increases, spouses frequently report lowered satisfaction and reduced commitment to maintaining the relationship (Knobloch, 2008).

**Conflict Resolution.** Conflict can occur at any time in marriage. Whenever two people in a relationship are involved in planning and carrying out their shared lives together, conflict can occur (Mahoney, 2005). According to Canary, Cupach, and Messman (1995), conflict is inevitable in meaningful relationships such as marriage.

Without the necessary conflict resolution skills, conflicts can become a major aspect of our lives due to frequency and intensity. How people resolve conflicts and how consistent they are when resolving conflicts is very important in relationships (Sternberg & Dobson, 1987). When dealing with conflict, Gottman, Gottman, and DeClaire (2006) stressed the importance of compromise, giving in, fighting fair, being gentle and positive, and postponing problem solving until after you feel connected. It is hypothesized that there are culturally specific ways of dealing with conflict (Bermudez, Reyes, & Wampler, 2006). A study was conducted to examine the conflict resolution styles of Latinos and whether their styles of dealing with conflict are different than the styles of other cultures (Bermudez et al., 2006). The study consisted of 191 married couples who identified as either Latino or Hispanic (Bermudez et al., 2006). The participants answered survey questions specific to conflict resolution (Bermudez et al., 2006). The participants were asked to respond to two sets of the same questions – one for the wife and one for the husband in the language they preferred (Bermudez et al., 2006). The couples had to answer the questions independently and return to the researcher (Bermudez et al., 2006). The participants were asked in the survey which conflict resolution style they preferred (Bermudez et al., 2006). The conflict resolution styles were based on Gottman's (1994a) Sound Marital House research on predictors of marital stability and instability (Bermudez et al., 2006). The conflict resolution styles were Volatile, Avoidant, and Validator (Bermudez et al., 2006). Conflict avoidant couples avoided conflict and tried to put arguments behind them (Bermudez et al., 2006). Conflict validator couples approached conflict in as positive manner as possible to counter any negativity (Bermudez et al.,

2006). Conflict volatile couples inserted negativity into the conflict, which included interruptions and passionate disagreements (Bermudez et al., 2006). The participants were found to be more avoidant in their style of conflict resolution (Bermudez et al., 2006). The findings showed no significant cultural differences in conflict resolution as hypothesized (Bermudez et al., 2006). Latino couples responded to conflicts in a very similar manner as couples of other cultures (Bermudez et al., 2006). All cultures experience conflict in their relationship and resolving the conflicts effectively and appropriately is instrumental in perceiving your marriage as satisfying. **Friendship.**

There are gender differences when defining friendship. Men experience friendship more intimately with individuals of the opposite sex, whereas women experience friendship more intimately with individuals of the same sex (Bell, 1981). Women self-disclose more deeply with their friends which consists of talking about personal problems, while men's relationships focus on more shared activities and less talking about feelings (Bell, 1981). Women see their same sex friendships as more therapeutic and more supportive than their opposite sex friendships, while men view opposite sex friendships as more intimate (Aries & Johnson, 1983). A study was conducted by Laner and Russell (1998) to examine the characteristics of a spouse and best friend to see if they would overlap. The study also hypothesized that the characteristic choices would not be significantly different for women than men (Laner & Russell, 1998). The study consisted of 350 college students who were all participating in a class about courtship and marriage (Laner & Russell, 1998). The students in the class were asked to answer a questionnaire that would indicate characteristics that they might want in a best friend and a spouse (Laner &

Russell, 1998). The students were directed to mark no more than six qualities that they would want in a best friend then look over the characteristics again and mark no more than six qualities that they would want in a spouse (Laner & Russell, 1998). The women's top six qualities desired in a spouse were almost identical to the men's top six qualities desired in a spouse (Laner & Russell, 1998). According to Laner and Russell (1998), men and women agreed on five of six qualities for a best friend. There was a significant overlap in the desired qualities for men and women when choosing a friend and a spouse (Laner & Russell, 1998). Although men and women define friendship differently, this study showed that men and women look for similar qualities in their friendships and spouse. This study also showed that what individuals look for in a spouse closely resembles their desires for a best friend, which shows the importance of friendship in marriage for both men and women. **Marital Satisfaction.** In studying marriage, researchers found that married couples typically refer to marital satisfaction as how they rate their partners as being happy or generally satisfied with the marriage and the spouse (Schumm et al., 1986).

Couples' communication is consistently related to their marital satisfaction in a significant way (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Couples who are unhappy seem to suffer from the inability to communicate effectively due to a lack of communication skills (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). This deficit usually contributes to marital dissatisfaction (Litzinger & Gordon, 2005). Individuals who lack communication skills tend to withdraw or become defensive during a conflict, which predicts marital dissatisfaction and dissolution in the future (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). The PREP program participants

have shown higher levels of positive communication skills and lower levels of negative communication skills, higher marriage satisfaction, and marital stability in three-and five-year follow-ups (Stahman, 2000).

### **Marital Counseling as Prevention**

The greatest hope for helping couples achieve the satisfying marriages they desire lies in prevention programs (Cole & Cole, 1999). When asked, 70% of married couples desire a successful, life-long marriage (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). Despite the desire of each member, 35% of marriages end in divorce (Emery, 1999; Tejada-Vera & Sutton, 2009). To reduce the rates of marital distress and divorce, premarital prevention programs have been developed and implemented (Senediak, 1990). Premarital prevention program is defined as knowledge and skill-based training that provides couples with ways to sustain and improve their marriage (Senediak, 1990). In contrast to intervention programs used with couples in distressed relationships, prevention programs have a goal of starting with non-distressed couples and helping them maintain their relatively high levels of functioning (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Prevention programs provide couples with the awareness of problems that might arise during marriage and how to prevent them (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

Research was conducted to provide a greater understanding of necessary relationship skills (Parr, Boyle, & Tejada, 2008). An “I said, you said” exercise was conducted as a beginning step in teaching couples more about their own style of communication, the power of non-verbals within the context of their relationship, and how perceptions can modify what one says or hears (Parr et al., 2008). The assumption is



that the more aware couples are of how they communicate with each other, the better their understanding of their own unique interactive patterns (Parr et al., 2008). When a couple develops unhelpful communication patterns, the message recipient may assume that the reaction that he or she has to a partner's message is what the partner intended for him or her to feel (Parr et al., 2008). This assumption contributes to the idea that negative outcomes are intentional, which increases the likelihood that partners will interpret the communication efforts of others negatively (Parr et al., 2008). This creates an atmosphere of mistrust and apprehension in the relationship (Gottman, 1999). The "I said, you said" exercise moves couples through a thoughtful process of examining how what is said is often not what is conveyed, also how what is heard is not necessarily what is meant (Parr et al., 2008). This exercise "helps couples clarify their verbal messages to each other, recognize their own unique communication styles, and reduce emotional reactivity in their interactions so that they might move past conflicts and impasses to negotiations and resolutions" (Parr et al., 2008, p. 169).

These studies consistently suggest that prevention programs are increasingly being used as a way to prevent marital distress and dissolution. Although these programs are increasingly more supported today than ever before, questions still remain concerning their effectiveness in strengthening marriages and preventing divorce. Based on these studies, conclusions can be made that marital prevention programs are effective in significant immediate improvements in communication skills, conflict management skills, and overall relationship quality. It can also be concluded that some participation in prevention programs is more effective for marriages than no participation at all.

### **Marital Counseling as Intervention**

When considering the current divorce rate, it is necessary to provide couples with effective intervention (Kreider, 2005). Although most types of marital therapies are effective in treating relationship discord, most distressed couples do not seek marital therapy (Doss et al., 2009). According to Johnson et al. (2002), only about 37% of divorcing couples report seeking any type of counseling or therapy for problems in their relationships and only 19% of currently married couples have sought counseling or therapy for relationship difficulties. Couples who do seek marital counseling or therapy often wait an average 6 years after serious relationship problems develop to seek help (Gottman & Gottman, 1999). Doss et al. (2009), suggested that couples seek marital therapy because they experience difficulty with emotional affection, communication, and arguments, desire to improve the relationship, and concerns about separation and divorce. The tendency to wait until there is a crisis in the relationship may be due to “the belief that troubles will spontaneously improve with time, that outside assistance should only be sought for the most serious problems, that the problems are too private to be shared, or that outside assistance will not alleviate the problem” (Bringle & Byers, 1997, p. 1).

Doss et al. (2009), conducted a longitudinal study to examine relationship helpseeking in the form of marital therapy, relationship-oriented workshops and retreats, and relationship-oriented self-help books. The objective of this study was to examine the effectiveness of marital intervention and how likely particular couples are to seek help (Doss et al., 2009). Three questions were asked for each of these types of help-seeking

(Doss et al., 2009). The questions that were asked were: (a) within the first 5 years of marriage, how common are these types of help-seeking behaviors, (b) is there a particular time during the first 5 years when couples are most likely to seek help, and (c) what predicts which type of help couples are likely to seek (Doss et al., 2009)? These assessments included demographic information, help-seeking behavior, marital satisfaction, confidence, dedication, depressive symptomatology, positive and negative observed communication, self-reported negative communication, physical aggression, and psychological aggression (Doss et al., 2009).

Doss et al. (2009), found that couples sought workshops/retreats or books before seeking marital therapy. Couples with lower marital satisfaction were more likely to seek marital therapy than couples who report satisfaction in their relationship (Doss et al., 2009). Marital therapy in the early years of marriage was used more for relationship help than for enrichment (Doss et al., 2009). In addition to marital dissatisfaction, self-reported negative communication also predicted the likelihood of seeking marital therapy (Doss et al., 2009). Like marital therapy, choosing to read a relationship-themed book was also predicted by higher levels of self-reported negative communication and marital dissatisfaction (Doss et al., 2009).

The findings from this study showed that there is an increase in the number of couples who seek different forms of help for their marriage (Doss et al., 2009). Therefore, marriage counseling, workshops, retreats and other forms of help should be deemed effective in meeting the needs of the participants. Effective programs and the

implementations of the programs will influence the experience that the participants have during their time in the program.

### **Research on the Effectiveness of Marital Counseling**

Corliss et al. (2004) found that those who use PREP, either before marriage or after, have lower rates of breakups or divorce than couples who took a different prevention class or nothing at all. Corliss et al. reviewed seven studies involving 500 couples and reported that PREP participants had less negative communication for up to five years after the course (Corliss et al., 2004). These studies provided a positive overall experience for couples who effectively implemented PREP in their marriage.

A quasi-experimental study was conducted to assess the long-term prediction of marital satisfaction after participation in relationship education (Baucom, Hahlweg, Atkins, Engl, & Thurmaier, 2006). Couples from Munich, Germany and other surrounding areas were recruited to participate in a Couples' Learning Program (EPL), which is a modified version of PREP. The program was modified to meet the needs of the couples in Germany (Baucom et al., 2006).

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effectiveness of the program (Baucom et al., 2006). The couples received some form of counseling that ranged from 15 minutes talking to a Catholic priest to a weeklong activity (Baucom et al., 2006). Couples were able to voluntarily choose the type of counseling that they wanted to participate in (Baucom et al., 2006). These couples were not randomly selected due to them being able to choose the specific courses that were listed in a booklet that was published once a year (Baucom et al., 2006).

EPL was delivered either in 6 weekly sessions of approximately 2.5-hr duration or at a weekend meeting (typically from Friday evening to Sunday afternoon) (Baucom et al., 2006). The first two sessions dealt with communication skills training (role playing and expressing negative feelings) (Baucom et al., 2006). Session three introduced a five-step problem solving scheme and the couples applied the scheme to one of their current relationship problems (Baucom et al., 2006). Session four dealt with expectations (Baucom et al., 2006). Session five dealt with communication about sex and session six dealt with the meaning of a Christian marriage (Baucom et al., 2006).

The main goal of the study was to examine the change in communication preworkshop to post-workshop and use that information to predict long-term marital satisfaction (Baucom et al., 2006). Although the couples in this study overall benefitted from EPL, this study found that an increase in positive communication for women predicted eventual relationship distress (Baucom et al., 2006). These findings indicate that women thought that they should only communicate positively and never communicate negatively which caused them to avoid discussions about very important issues. This lack of communication contributed to the dissatisfaction in their marriages (Baucom et al., 2006). Communication is important in relationships when addressing all issues concerning the couple. For long term marriages to exist, couples must learn how to communicate effectively in order to ensure that both individuals feel heard and understood.

Markman, Rhoades, Stanley, and Petersen (2013) conducted a study to evaluate the effectiveness of premarital intervention on divorce during the first 8 years of

marriage. Premarital couples were recruited from religious organizations that would perform their weddings (Markman et al., 2013). The religious organizations were randomly assigned to provide the couples with either their naturally occurring services or some form of PREP (Markman et al., 2013). Couples who received PREP intervention received workshops one weekend day, usually Saturday followed by two evening meetings a week apart (Markman et al., 2013). The intervention was 12 hours long and consisted of 12 lessons that covered topics related to decreasing risk factors (e.g., recognizing communication danger signs that threaten relationship safety, learning communication and conflict management skills, learning problem solving skills) and increasing protective factors (e.g., fun, friendship, commitment, support, sensuality) (Markman et al., 2013).

Couples who received the naturally occurring services were provided with a wide array of premarital programs representative of practice in the field (Markman et al., 2013). These services ranged in length from one to eight hours of contact (Markman et al., 2013). These couples received no intervention (Markman et al., 2013). The couples met with clergy to discuss wedding plans, formal assessment on a personality test and general information around an array of topics (e.g., communication, family planning, finances) by various methods (e.g., requires readings, lectures, or discussion of various topics) (Markman et al., 2013). Aggression and negative communication were measured in this study (Markman et al., 2013).

This study showed no difference in effectiveness for couples who participated in

PREP versus couples who received naturally occurring services (Markman et al., 2013). However, the study did find that couple negativity prior to premarital intervention moderated how the types of premarital intervention impacted divorce, but the pattern was in the opposite direction of what was expected based on prior literature (Markman et al., 2013). Couples who had higher levels of observed negative communication before marriage were more likely to eventually divorce if they were assigned to PREP compared with naturally occurring premarital services (Markman et al., 2013). Conversely, among couples with lower levels of negative communication prior to marriage, Markman et al. (2013) found that couples in PREP were less likely to divorce than those in naturally occurring services. A similar pattern of moderation was apparent for having a history of physical aggression in the relationship, though not significant (Markman et al., 2013). These findings highlights that the role that divorce plays in what is considered indicators of “effective” couple interventions should be reevaluated (Markman et al., 2013). An effective couple intervention is beneficial prior to marriage in order to gain the skills necessary to have in a satisfying marriage. An effective intervention provides skills such as communication, expectations, beliefs, and conflict resolution that are useful in marriage (Markman et al., 2013).

An experimental study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a version of the PREP program (Carroll & Doherty, 2003). This version of the PREP program incorporates self-regulation training as part of the curriculum (SELF-PREP). The study included 79 couples who were grouped into high and low risk for relationship distress.

The high risk group included 36 couples and the low risk group included 47 couples.

Couples were placed into high risk groups if the woman had reported that her parents were divorced or if the man reported that his father had been violent toward his mother.

Through SELF-PREP, high risk intervention couples showed a decrease in negative behavior at 1 year. High risk couples also showed less erosion of relationship satisfaction over the four year period than control group couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

However, low risk intervention couples had significantly higher erosion of relationship satisfaction over the four year period than control group couples (Carroll & Doherty, 2003).

This study asserts that small steady changes promote positive growth in relationships. Individuals who participate in this model of marital counseling are taught how to negotiate effectively with their partner.

Other marriage counseling programs have also been studied in order to gain a more comprehensive view of the benefits of counseling. Marriage counseling has been demonstrated by researchers to be generally effective (Tambling, Wong, & Anderson, 2014). Further, meta-analyses and single studies indicate that marriage counseling is highly effective in remedying a variety of specific mental health problems, decreasing divorce, and improving individual and family health and well-being (Sprenkle, 2012). Couples seek counseling for many reasons and at different points in their relationships. Couples also enter the counseling environment with their own individual expectations about the process. Past research has suggested a link between clients' expectations about



therapy and positive therapy experiences (Tambling et al., 2014). Positive views about improvements in relationships often lead to positive feelings about counseling.

Marriage and Relationship Education programs (MRE) are described as skillsbased groups created to prevent and remedy marital distress (Larson, 2004). These programs are funded by the government. Some MRE programs have begun to tailor their programs toward low-income families but it is unclear how these adapted programs are received and experienced by participants (Szarzynski, Porter, Whiting, & Harris, 2012). Research was designed to explore low-income mothers' views on marriage and relationships, particularly as they relate to MRE participation (Szarzynski et al., 2012). The study also investigated what was helpful or beneficial to them in the MRE program in which they participated (Szarzynski et al., 2012). Low-income mothers were recruited to participate in a focus group. There were 10 mothers randomly selected to be in each of two groups. The mothers were asked questions in the groups. The mothers generally stated that the MRE classes were helpful and enjoyed by a majority of the women who participated; however there also seemed to be a disbelief in marriage or a hopeless feeling regarding marriage. There was a dichotomy of thought when these women reflected about marriage, which was split into how marriage is in real life and how marriage is "supposed to be" (Szarzynski et al., 2012). The women seemed to have been shaped by past experiences which prevented them from envisioning any possibility of having an ideal marriage (Szarzynski et al., 2012). The women stated that they benefitted from MRE classes through social support, communication skill-building, and learning about marital readiness. There seemed to be a consensus in the group of women that being

ready – physically, emotionally, and financially – for marriage is of vast importance (Szarzynski et al., 2012). The participants had mixed beliefs and attitudes regarding their expectations about marriage. There appeared to be conflicted thoughts about what an ideal marriage looks like and what a real marriage is. They displayed an overwhelming lack of trust in men, which seemed to originate from past experiences in romantic relationships. These results coincided with Manning, Trella, Lyons, and DuToit's (2010) study in which gender distrust was found to influence marriage prospects. Any good examples the women were shown from their families and friends were few but appeared to be held as ideal, while the bad examples were more plentiful and were held as the standard or the reality of marriage. This study aligns with the other MRE literature stating that social support, communication skill-building, and discussing marital readiness are important components in curricula presented to low-income populations (Cox & Shiver, 2009; Manning et al., 2010; Rienks et al., 2011).

A study was conducted that suggested that expectations are formed prior to engagement in counseling (Tambling & Johnson, 2010). This research suggested that individuals who engage in counseling form expectations about the therapist and the experience of therapy that inform their actual experiences in counseling (Tambling & Johnson, 2010). The study sought to explore clients' expectations about counseling. Ten couples seeking counseling at a university based marriage and family therapy clinic participated in this study. All of the couples were over the age of 18 and had been in a relationship over six months long. The couples were interviewed regarding their expectations about counseling. The results were that all of the participants held

expectations for their experiences during therapy (Tambling et al., 2014). The following is a list of just a few of the expectations that the couples held. They expected that counseling would involve a process of discussing issues with the therapist on a deeper level. They expected the therapist to challenge them throughout this process, in order to help view their issues differently. They expected the therapist to ask questions, listen, and attempt to learn about the clients. Participants also held the expectation that the therapy process would include the therapist lending another perspective to the problems that caused couples to feel stuck or trapped. As stated earlier, couples enter into the counseling environment with these and other expectations. If expectations are not met during the counseling process, it is very likely that the experience of counseling will be rated unfavorably. Likewise, if all expectations are met during the counseling process, it is very likely that the experience of counseling will be rated favorably.

Marital education is helpful for treating marital distress. Religious organizations have been identified as a particularly useful outlet for the dissemination of marital education (Hook, Worthington, Hook, Miller, & Davis, 2011). Marriage is of particular concern to pastoral care because of its centrality to congregational life (Hook et al., 2011). Pastoral counseling for marital and other couple problems also takes up a substantial amount of the counseling time for pastoral counselors (Hook & Worthington, 2009).

Marriage Matters is a 9 week (18 hour) workshop that was created and developed by pastors and counselors at a religious institution. It is held three times per year. It is designed for both couples who desire to invest in their relationship as well as for couples

who are experiencing marital difficulties (Hook et al., 2011). Each session lasts 2 hours and has two main components. In the first hour, a speaker teaches on one specific marital education topic. Partners listen and engage in activities throughout the teaching time. In the second hour, each partner is assigned to a small group (4-5 couples) that is led by a trained group leader or couple. They discuss the topic and their reactions both in the group and with each other and engage in activities related to the topic. At the end of the session, partners are given homework to practice what was learned in the session and devotions related to the teaching topic. Topics that are covered in Marriage Matters include family-of-origin issues, empathic dialogue, conflict resolution, forgiveness, sexual intimacy, boundaries, rebuilding trust, managing anger, negotiating finances, and raising children. The participants were 731 first time attendees at a Marriage Matters workshop. The participants completed an anonymous two-page survey. They rated their overall experience in the workshop on a 5-point Likert scale. They also rated the perceived quality of their marriage before and after the program. The results showed that the program was perceived as providing couples a satisfying experience and leading to improvement in the partners' marriage. Participants also reported satisfaction with the program and perceived their marriages as improved compared to the beginning of the program.

Schumm et al. (2010) found that the quality of premarital counseling, specifically within a religious setting, predicts both the short- and long-term helpfulness of premarital counseling in a couple's relationship. Currently, little is known about the content and requirements of marriage preparation provided by clergy (Wilmoth & Fournier, 2009).

For long-term behavioral change to occur, the length and intensity of marriage preparation are key structural components (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). One study revealed that couples who had attended four or more education sessions rated their marriage preparation significantly higher than those who attended no sessions or one session of premarital education (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Hawkins, Blanchard, Baldwin, and Fawcett's (2008) meta-analysis revealed that programs with a moderate dosage of instructional time produce significantly stronger effects.

The format of marriage preparation is distinguished by whether the approach is information or skills based (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Information-based premarital education promotes understanding of the concept through lectures, demonstrations, and/or audiovisual presentations. Skills-based marriage preparation not only promotes understanding and knowledge but also provides opportunities to practice relationship skills and receive feedback on their skills (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). The PREP program is an example of a skills-based marriage program. Participants in this study represented the three largest religious groups in the United States (Roman Catholic, evangelical Protestant, and mainline Protestant). Participants were asked on a questionnaire things such as whether clergy required a waiting period before the wedding and if so what was the length of the waiting period in months? If required by clergy, what premarital couple inventory was completed by the participant? If sessions with the pastor were required, what was the number of sessions as well as the length of time in minutes per session? If homework was required by clergy, what was the number of assignments given? If sessions after the wedding were required, list the number of

sessions and how many months after the wedding the sessions took place? Participants were also asked to rate on a Likert scale how effectively the clergy dealt with the wedding ceremony, realistic expectations, roles, children/parenting, career, personality/temperament, relationship to God, communication, conflict resolution, problem solving, family-of-origin, finances/budgeting, in-law relationships, friends, sexual relations, family planning, spiritual dimensions of marriage, and legal issues. To determine the format clergy use in marriage preparation, participants were asked to check which of the following best describes their approach to marriage preparation: information-based or skills-based. The participants responded positively to whether or not the clergy dealt with important relationship issues effectively. The participants overall had a positive view of the counseling program and the process.

The two studies exploring religious based marriage counseling previously discussed suggest that clergy seem to be providing preparation that helps couples form more stable and satisfying marriages. Denominational and community agencies should continually encourage clergy to emphasize premarital and marital counseling and also should offer continuing education opportunities to teach clergy how to provide training to couples in skills such as communication and conflict resolution (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). These efforts to increase effectiveness of clergy in preparing couples for marriage can help religious communities have an even greater impact on the economic, social, and emotional well-being of individuals and families (Wilmoth & Smyser, 2012). Religious based counseling programs are not grounded in scientific theory as PREP and other

counseling programs are but religious organizations are increasingly providing counseling to individuals for both prevention and intervention.

### **Summary of Chapter 2**

Research has provided an understanding of the effectiveness of marital counseling on couples who participate (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). The studies examined how marital intervention and prevention affects the success of marriage both immediately following treatment and long-term (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Some of the listed studies show that there are no long-term effects of marital counseling programs while other studies suggest that, in varying degrees, marital counseling programs have longterm positive effects (Oberlander, Agostini, Houston, & Black, 2010). While the potential importance of effective marital counseling is known, the gap in the literature was understanding and describing the experience of the individuals who participated in PREP and how they reported their marital satisfaction.

Communication and conflict management is detailed as a significant key to a successful marriage (Briks, 2003). Prevention and intervention programs teach couples the skills necessary to maintain effective communication and conflict resolution skills that will greatly influence their marriages for many years (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). There were limitations in the current, available research on the marital counseling programs, such as taking into account the number of participants who decline to participate in the studies and those who begin the studies but fail to complete the studies. Another limitation in the current, available research that needed to be considered was the reader understanding that individuals who volunteer to participate in the study are usually

the same individuals who are interested in maintaining a successful marriage, and they are more willing to do the work necessary. Although there are many limitations to the studies described, the findings provide important information necessary in conducting future studies in the area of marital counseling programs. In Chapter 3, I provided information on the procedures used in conducting this study. These procedures included the process of selecting the participants, the research questions that were asked, and how the data collected was organized and analyzed.



## Chapter 3: Research Method

### Introduction

In Chapter 3, I reviewed the methodology and data collection processes and showed how the study design was derived from the problem statement. The following areas are discussed in this chapter (a) description and rationale for research approach, (b) researcher's role, (c) description of the research sample, (d) method of data collection, (e) analysis and synthesis of data, (f) ethical considerations, and (g) issues of trustworthiness. This chapter concluded with a summary of the study design.

Because I sought to understand the experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP and how they reported their perceived marital satisfaction, the qualitative design was the logical choice for this study. According to Markman et al. (2010), individuals who participate in PREP may gain more effective communication skills, more realistic beliefs and expectations about their spouse, and improved relational skills than individuals who opt out of the program. What was not known, however, was how individuals perceived the experience of PREP, and how individuals perceived the effects of participation in PREP on marital satisfaction. The study helped to understand the experiences of the married individuals who participated in PREP. This chapter outlined the phenomenological method that was used to aid in understanding their experiences. Also included in this chapter was a detailed discussion of the research methodology, research design, the role of the researcher, participants, measures, research questions, ethical protection, procedures, data collection, data analysis, and verification of findings.

### **Research Design and Rationale**

There are two research questions that were used in this phenomenological study to help understand the experiences of the married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling.

#### **Research Questions**

1. How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their experiences in PREP?
2. How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their marital satisfaction?

According to Moustakas (1994), qualitative designs help researchers study “human experiences that are not approachable through quantitative approaches” (p. 21). Qualitative methods differ from quantitative in that the researcher is able to obtain more depth and detail about the research topic and is the key instrument through the collection of data (Patton, 2001). According to Patton (2001), quantitative methods limit participants’ ability to identify with their own experiences by reducing their experiences to predetermined responses and categories. Qualitative methods allow participants to choose and describe their own experiences. In this study, I wanted to understand the lived experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling.

I considered the following paradigms for conducting qualitative research: grounded theory, ethnography, case study and phenomenology.

The grounded theory is a strategy that provides an explanation through the processes of developing a theory (Mello & Flint, 2009). The basis in grounded theory requires theoretical sampling and research questions (Strauss, 1987). Grounded theory is an “inductive, discovery-oriented approach” (Woolley, Butler, & Wampler, 2000, p. 315). In other words, in order to facilitate the discovery of new knowledge, a fresh creative look at the phenomena being studied must be taken (Woolley et al., 2000). This method is very useful when little is known about the phenomena being studied. This method is useful for “theory building, not theory testing” (Woolley et al., 2000, p. 317). Grounded theory was not chosen because the focus of the proposed study was to expand research not develop or build a theory. This approach was determined not to be the right method for this study.

Ethnographic inquiry asks the central question: What does it mean to study one's own culture or a group in which one already plays other roles (Wolcott, 1999). Ethnographic studies describe the structure of the culture, rather than people and their social interactions and emotions (Morse, 1994). In order to describe the structure of the culture, the researcher is an observer in the environment for a prolonged time (Munhall, 2007). This approach was determined not to be the best method because the focus of the study was to understand how individuals experience a particular phenomenon as individuals rather than as a cultural group.

Case study is another strategy of inquiry that was considered. Case study inquiry is when the “researcher explores in depth a program, event, activity, process, or one or

more individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p.13). Case studies allow the researcher an extended period of time to collect detailed data about a participant (Stake, 1995). This approach does not support the intent of this research because the intended research was not concerned with data collected over a sustained period of time. Another reason why this approach was determined not to be the right choice is that the population studied was too large to employ this strategy of inquiry. The intent of this study was to understand what was being experienced as a result of a particular phenomenon.

The method that I chose to use in developing the design for this research was the phenomenological research design. Phenomenological inquiry is the process of “revealing the essence of experiences in which others can derive knowledge about a unified meaning of an experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 84). Phenomenological inquiry “avoids, as much as possible, the use of assumptions about the phenomenon under study, avoids reducing complex reality to a few variables and minimizes the use of instruments that are reactive and that greatly influence the reality being studied” (Lancy, 1993, p. 9). Quantitative approaches were not considered since the purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experience of the married individuals who participated in PREP and how they described marital satisfaction. After considering various qualitative traditions, the phenomenology method was chosen to gain an understanding of the experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP. According to Lancy (1993), qualitative studies are conducted when phenomena are complex and little is known with certainty. There are studies available that define variables associated with

PREP but it was difficult to find variables defined in research that provided an understanding of the lived experience of married individuals who participated in PREP.

### **The Role of the Researcher**

The role of the researcher was to design the study, and gather and analyze the data. I established rapport, made participants feel comfortable, and treated them with dignity, which allowed them to feel safe in the interview process. I also ensured protection of the participants by providing a safe environment and maintaining participant confidentiality. I provided and clearly defined the study and explained the consent form to the participants. I informed them of their voluntary participation and explained their option to answer or not answer any question that they choose at any time. I had no prior personal or professional relationship with the participants that involved me having any power over them.

It was essential to control researcher bias in the proposed study. According to Creswell (1998), addressing the researcher bias will inform the reader of the beliefs relating to the proposed study. I am a marriage and family therapist who has facilitated PREP marriage counseling in the past. I also believe strongly that marriage counseling is an effective tool in managing a positive marriage. I am very aware of my biases. I used individual interview responses, interview notes, and journaling in order to block my biases and assumptions. This allowed me to explain the phenomenon in terms of the experiences of the participants. These sources were also used to gain dependability in the study and provide a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants. I

bracketed my own experiences in order to remove all bias. This was accomplished by avoiding the judgments and connections that I had with the phenomenon of participation in PREP and only analyzing the facts and meanings of the individual experiences. I remained focused on the research questions which ensured that participants' stories were understood and presented honestly, clearly, and with integrity while I remained opened to those experiences unlike my own.

### **Research Methodology**

The proposed study examined the experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP and also provided an understanding of their experiences. Criterion sampling was to select the participants in the study (Patton, 2001). Participants were required to meet predetermined criteria in order to participate. Data was collected using individual interviews. The interviews provided an understanding and description of the experiences of the married individuals who participated in PREP. The interviews also explored how the participants felt that their participation in PREP had impacted their perception of marital satisfaction.

### **Participants of the Study**

The participants in this study consisted of 10 English speaking, married individuals from diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, who were at least eighteen years of age, with a minimum of a high school diploma, and who had participated in PREP within the past 12 months. The participants could not be married to other participants in the study.

Ten married individuals were chosen for this proposed study in order to gain a detailed inquiry about their experiences. The smaller number of participants in this phenomenological study provided greater insight into the essence or meaning of the participants' lived experiences (Moustakas, 1994). Phenomenological research requires that only a limited number of people be interviewed given the vast amount of data that emerges from even one interview (Hycner, 1999). A smaller number of participants allowed the researcher to gain a deeper insight into their experiences. I ensured that saturation was achieved using 10 participants by making sure that I saw nor heard any new information come out of the interviews.

Criterion sampling was used to select participants based on meeting specific criteria. Criterion sampling strategy was chosen because it “involves selecting cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2001, p. 238). Criterion sampling is useful in understanding cases that are rich with information (Patton, 2001). The basic criteria for selection was that the participants were English speaking, married individuals with a minimum high school diploma and who had participated in PREP at the research site within the last year. The participants could not be married to other participants in the study. The participants for the study were selected from a church located in southern California. I sent an informative letter to the research site requesting that the letter be sent to all individuals who had participated in PREP no more than a year ago. Church affiliation was not a requirement for participation in this study since this study was only interested in the experiences of the participants, not their church

affiliation or religion. I contacted, via telephone, the potential participants and explained the proposed study as well as the purpose of the study. I scheduled an interview with the individuals who were interested in participating in the study. The individuals were informed that the interviews would last approximately 1 hour and would take place in a private and secure room located in a local public library. At the start of the interview, I provided the participants with an informed consent (see Appendix A) that explained their role and rights as a participant in the study as well as informed them of the protection that they would receive as a participant. I also provided the participants with a letter describing the details of the proposed study (see Appendix B).

### **Data Collection**

I contacted, via telephone, the Care and Support Department at a local church in southern California to provide information about the study. I also sent, via mail, an informative letter, (see Appendix C), providing detailed information about the study to the local church requesting assistance with recruiting married individuals who had participated in PREP within the last year. I asked the Care and Support Department to send an email to all individuals who had participated in PREP within the last year requesting that they contact me if they were interested in participating in the study. The email included an informative letter to the participant (see Appendix B), that provided detailed information about the study as well as my name, email address, and cellular number. The email also included a 2 week deadline that the potential participants had to contact me.



This study included 10 married individuals who had participated in PREP within the last year. After the potential participants expressed their interest by email or cellular, I responded to the potential participants, via email or telephone, to explain the proposed study, determine their interest in participating in this study, and to schedule the individual interview. I informed the participants about the duration of the interview as well as the location. I informed the participants that the interview would last approximately 1 hour. I informed the individuals that any information collected during individual interviews would be kept confidential and would not be shared with anyone else. All participants were then given a scheduled date to complete the individual interviews. I asked permission to audiotape the interviews. As a means to follow-up with the recruitment process, if I was not able to get the expected number of participants that met the criteria, I would implement snowball sampling. Snowball sampling is “when the researcher accesses informants through contact information that is provided by other informants” (Noy, 2008, p. 330). The participants in the study would have referred me to other potential participants. This would have been a repetitive process until I had 10 married individuals to participate in the study. Snowball sampling was not necessary in the proposed study because I achieved the expected number of participants who met the criteria.

At the beginning of each interview I reviewed the consent form. Reviewing the consent form ensured that the participants understood their rights as participants in the study. The consent form included permission to audiotape the interview. I gave each

participant a letter describing the proposed study (see Appendix B), as well as, two consent forms (see Appendix A) to sign. Each participant kept one consent form and I kept the other consent form for my records. I informed the participants that they could ask questions anytime during the interview process, if they had any. I informed the participants that they could refuse to answer a question or leave the study if they wanted to.

Data was collected during the individual interview. Along with audiotaping the interview, I took notes in order to capture nonverbal communication and supplement the taped interview data. The information gained during the individual interview provided an understanding of the context in which marital satisfaction and PREP were experienced. I asked questions during the individual interviews that answered the research questions that guided this study (see Appendix D). I asked open ended questions and probed as necessary. I asked the following interview questions in an attempt to answer the first research question which asked: How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their experiences in PREP?

1. What led you to participating in PREP?
2. Have you ever participated in counseling in the past?
3. Give examples of tools/strategies that you learned during your participation in PREP.
4. How might you use these tools/strategies in your marriage when difficult situations arise?
5. Describe your feelings of support and understanding while participating in PREP.

6. What are some things that happened during your participation in PREP that made you feel supported and understood?
7. What could have been done while in PREP that would have made you feel more supported and understood?

I asked the following interview questions in an attempt to answer the second research question which asked: How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their marital satisfaction?

1. Define and describe what marital satisfaction is to you.
2. How has your participation in PREP contributed to your perceptions of marital satisfaction?
3. How has your participation in PREP challenged your ideals of marital satisfaction?

As a means to follow up with the participants, I concluded the individual interviews by informing each participant that within approximately one to two weeks he or she would receive by mail a copy of their transcribed interview. All participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the interview to ensure that questions or concerns regarding participation in the study were addressed. Participants were informed that if questions arose at a later time they could contact me via email. I provided a list of local counselors to each participant after the individual interview in case he or she needed to speak with someone further as a result of the study. If a participant became stressed and needed help during the interview, I allowed the participant to break from the interview and either reconvene at a later time or a later date. I also gave the participant a list of community resources to contact if he or she needed to speak to a professional. Each

participant was asked to review his or her own interview transcript to ensure that the data represented his or her own experiences in PREP. I asked the participants to respond by mail within one week of receiving their transcribed interview if any of the results were not a true representation of their experience. I also gave the participants the option to meet with me at the research site to discuss the transcribed data if they felt more comfortable.

Files of transcribed interviews were created in order to organize the data collected. All data from the home computer was saved to a flash drive. The computer logon is password protected and the flash drive is secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office to prevent tampering. The data will be deleted from the flash drive after 5 years of transferring data. Data will be deleted from audio tape 5 years after transcribing. All paper notes and transcribed data are secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office to prevent tampering. All paper notes and transcribed data will be disposed of 5 years after obtained by use of a paper shredder.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis provided an understanding of the importance and usefulness of the collected data. Analyzing data was necessary in order to gain an understanding of what the data was conveying. I conducted data analysis by transcribing the data, coding the data, labeling themes, and interpreting the meaning of the experiences.

The data was transcribed and analyzed after all interviews were completed. After the interviews were transcribed, I gained an overall understanding of the data by reading

and rereading the transcripts at least twice. During transcription I interpreted and represented in written form what the participants verbally expressed in the interview. This is the first step in understanding the meaning of the experience (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003).

The next step in analyzing the data was the coding process. The coding process begins by extracting meaning units from the transcribed text (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). Each interview was coded immediately following transcription to ensure that the data was properly coded and not forgotten or misrepresented. All identifiable information was deleted from the data in order to maintain participant anonymity and confidentiality. I coded each interview by establishing reoccurring themes that showed up in the transcripts. As I read the transcripts, I highlighted the themes and phrases using colored markers. This allowed me to summarize and group the participants' responses into themes based on the similarity of their responses. I also made notes in the margins of the transcript as another means of highlighting themes.

The third step in analyzing the data was labeling the themes or meaning units. I analyzed the data by reviewing the notes and recognizing themes that occurred through the responses of the participants. This process included grouping and labeling meaning units into categories or themes relevant to the phenomenon being studied. The grouped and labeled meaning units provided an understanding of the experience of married individuals who participated in PREP. The purpose of this step is to "discover and articulate the psychological meanings being lived by the participants that reveal the

nature of the phenomenon being researched” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 252). The participants’ descriptions full of “everyday expressions” and meaning units was used to transform these statements into “psychologically sensitive expressions” (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003, p. 250). These expressions allowed the researcher to gain insight into the perception of how the participants experienced PREP. The psychological expressions were used to describe the everyday expressions made by the participants as they related their experiences. Verbatim responses from the transcripts were used when reporting the data.

The final step in analyzing the data involved interpreting the experience of the participants. This was achieved by constructing how the individuals defined their PREP experiences. This process included finding associations between the participants’ experiences that brought out the essence of the meanings of the experiences (Giorgi & Giorgi, 2003). This was achieved by examining for understanding what each individual participant experienced during PREP. The connections from each participant’s interview was clustered to find the essence of the experience as a whole. This composite description of a group of married individuals provided a better understanding of the PREP experiences and the influence on marital satisfaction. This information provided a complete picture of the experiences of the participants. I looked for meaningful connections related to the phenomenon by understanding the descriptions and themes of the experiences of the participants.

### **Issues of Trustworthiness**

Verifying data is an approach to determine whether the findings are valid and reliable. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), qualitative researchers seek to establish whether the study has been conducted in a trustworthy manner. In order to accomplish this, the findings must be credible, transferable, and dependable. In qualitative research several methods are available for assessing validity of the findings (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). In this study I employed such methods as triangulation, member checking, and rich, clarifying researcher bias, thick description, and discrepant cases.

#### **Credibility**

The quality of research is related to generalizability of the results which increases internal validity and trustworthiness of the research (Mathison, 1988). Triangulation is typically a strategy used to improve reliability and validity of research (Mathison, 1988). According to Patton (1990), triangulation is the process of using multiple sources, such as audio recordings, observations, field notes, case studies, documents and interviews, for the purpose of validating findings. With this strategy in research, the researcher looked for a theme by gaining information from multiple sources. By drawing on multiple viewpoints, accuracy and credibility were established. In order to improve reliability and validity in this study, I used audio recording, note taking, and interviews.

Member checking is a strategy implemented to ensure that the data collected is accurate and reflects the true thoughts and feelings provided by the participant (Merriam,

1998). I implemented member checking by offering the participants a follow-up interview and providing them with an opportunity to comment on the information that they provided in their interviews. The individual interviews concluded by informing each participant that within approximately one to two weeks he or she would receive individually by mail a copy of their interview transcript. The participants were asked to review the transcripts and ensure that the data represents their experiences in PREP. I gave the participants one week to respond via mail if any of the results were not a true representation of their experience. I also gave the participants the option to meet with me at the research site to discuss the transcribed data if they felt more comfortable. All participants were debriefed at the conclusion of the interview to ensure that if they had any questions or concerns regarding their participation in the study, they were able to contact me via email.

### **Transferability**

Another strategy of verification stems from having a rich, thick description. This study provided a rich, thick description of the experiences of the participants based on their perspective (Sells, Smith, & Moon, 1996). I accomplished this by providing verbatim transcripts that include descriptive information. I provided notes in the transcript margins highlighting meaning units and also direct quotes from the participants. This process of analysis provided rich, thick descriptions that provided a detailed account of the experiences of the participants, which provided external validity to the study (Sells et al., 1996). I described the phenomenon in detail which made it possible to transfer the



findings to other situations. According to Holloway (1997), thick description provides detailed accounts of the experiences in which the researcher looks for patterns and puts them into the context of the study.

### **Dependability**

I used individual interview responses and interview notes in order to gain dependability in the study. I used journaling as another source that provided a deeper understanding of the experiences of the participants, as well as their described marital satisfaction. The journals were used as a means of reflection in order to gain new understandings of the experiences of the individuals who participated in PREP. The interview notes, participant responses, and journal notes were used to determine the areas of agreement as well as areas of divergence.

### **Confirmability**

Discrepant cases were considered when interpreting the participants' descriptions of their experiences. Ponterotto and Grieger (2007) stated that satisfactory discrepant case analysis should include a combination of the data for both disconfirming and confirming cases of the phenomenon being studied. I distinguished discrepant cases by accurately interpreting the responses of the participants and analyzing both confirming and disconfirming descriptions. This strategy minimized the researcher's likely tendency to pursue only the evidence that would support corroborating findings.

### **Ethical Procedures**

I sought IRB approval prior to conducting research with human participants.

After approval to conduct research with the participants is received, a request was made to the research site for an email to be sent to all married individuals who had participated in PREP in the last year. Included in the email was a detailed description of the proposed study, my email address, and my cellular number. The email was sent to only individuals who were at least 18 years of age and speak English. These individuals were in their first marriages but could not be married to other participants in the study. The potential participants contacted me by email or telephone.

Upon receiving emails from those interested in participating in the study I scheduled interviews with the participants. The interviews took place in a safe and secure room that was private to ensure participant's confidentiality. The interview location was a private room in the education building of a private school when school was not in session. To ensure that the researcher and the participants were protected from unethical procedures, I became familiar with the guidelines associated with conducting research with human subjects by reading the Ethical Principles and Guidelines for Conducting Research with Human Participants (American Psychological Association, 2014). All participants were treated fairly and honestly during the duration of the study. The participants were informed that their participation in the study was voluntary and they could end their participation in the study at any time. Participants were told they had the right to refuse to answer questions they did not want to answer. All participants signed two consent forms (see Appendix A). Each participant received one signed consent form and I received the other signed consent form to keep for my records (see

Appendix A). I also informed the participants that their confidentiality was protected and there was no known harm associated with participation in the study.

Only I have access to the collected data. I removed all identifying information from collected data prior to data analysis. I assigned each participant an identification number prior to collecting the data. The identification numbers were used when transcribing data. The identification numbers were necessary to protect the identity of the participants. The identification numbers were used when reporting the findings as well. All data from the home computer is saved to a flash drive. The computer logon is password protected and the flash drive is secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office to prevent tampering. The data will be deleted from the flash drive after 5 years of transferring data. All paper notes and transcribed data is secured in a locked file cabinet in the researcher's home office to prevent tampering. All paper notes and transcribed data will be disposed of 5 years after obtained by use of a paper shredder. Data will be deleted from audio tape 5 years after transcribing.

Ethical concerns did not exist from maintaining the desired sample of participants. No participants chose to withdraw early from the study. Therefore, there was no need to implement snowball sampling in order to recruit additional participants. No adverse events needed to be communicated to the chairperson on my dissertation committee.

### **Summary of Chapter 3**

This study used the phenomenological research design to provide an understanding of the experiences of the PREP participants. Participants were chosen based on specific predetermined criteria. There were 10 married individuals who were English speaking with at least a high school diploma chosen to participate in this study. The participants could not be married to other participants in the study. The participants consisted of individuals who had participated in PREP. The participants were informed of their rights to confidentiality and their voluntary participation in the study. The questions were based on the two research questions presented in the chapter: How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their experiences in PREP and how do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their marital satisfaction. I collected and analyzed data and ensured trustworthiness of the findings through member checking, discrepant cases, rich and thick descriptions, clarifying researcher bias, and triangulation.

## Chapter 4: Results

### **Introduction**

In this chapter, I provided the analysis and findings of the data that was collected from married individuals who had participated in PREP. The married individuals who were interviewed shared their personal experiences while participating in PREP marital counseling.

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling. The two research questions were framed to examine how individuals experience marital counseling and their perception of marital satisfaction following PREP marital counseling. This information will add to the existing literature as it relates to marital satisfaction and marriage counseling using the PREP method. I will discuss the results of the study as they relate to the research questions that guided the study. The participants, data collection methods and data analysis will also be discussed in detail in this chapter.

### **Research Questions**

There were two research questions that were addressed in this phenomenological study that provided an understanding of the experiences of the married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling. The two research questions also provided an understanding of the married individuals' perceived reported marital satisfaction.

1. How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their experience in PREP?

2. How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their marital satisfaction?

### Participants and Demographics

The participants in this study consisted of ten married individuals who had participated in PREP marriage counseling. The participants were men and women who had been married from two years to thirty-five years. The participants interviewed in this study were English speaking, heterosexual individuals in their first marriages. None of the participants were married to other participants in the study. All of the participants were at least 18 years of age and had participated in PREP within the past 12 months. All 10 participants completed the 12 session program that met one time a week for one hour.

The main participant demographics of the study are listed below in Table 1.

Table 1

#### *Main Study Demographics*

Participants	Gender	Age	# Years married	# Sessions Completed	Completed Course
1	Male	62	32	12	06 27 2015
2	Female	43	16	12	06 27 2015
3	Female	38	2 ½	12	06 27 2015
4	Male	47	4	12	06 27 2015
5	Female	45	6	12	06 27 2015
6	Male	36	5	12	06 27 2015
7	Female	32	2	12	06 27 2015
8	Female	35	7	12	06 27 2015
9	Male	38	1	12	06 27 2015
10	Female	37	3	12	06 27 2015

There were no personal or organizational conditions that I was aware of that influenced the participants or their experience at the time of the study that would influence the interpretation of the study results.

### **Data Collection**

I emailed an administrator at the research site describing the study and asking for participation in recruiting potential participants (see Appendix C). After the administrator agreed to participate in the study, I emailed him a letter of cooperation (see Appendix E) to be signed and returned to me in addition to an attachment letter intended to be emailed to the potential participants which gave a detailed description of the study, selection criteria, and a request for their participation (see Appendix B). The letters that were emailed to the potential participants by the research site included my telephone number and email address for the potential participants to contact me if they were interested in participating in the study and met the selection criteria. Although there were 13 participants that contacted me, I accepted the first 10 individuals that met the criteria for participation in the study. I chose the first 10 participants because the study was formed using 10 individual participants. Two of the participants wanted to know if their spouse could participate and I informed them at that time that either he or she or his or her spouse could participate but both of them could not participate in the study due to the nature of the study. No other participants were excluded from participating in the study. I briefly introduced myself to each potential participants and reiterated the purpose of the

study in order to ensure that they clearly understood the study that they would be participating in. At that time I also scheduled a time for the interviews to take place. Prior to conducting each interview, I gave a brief description of what an informed consent form (see Appendix A) was and asked each participant to sign two forms. One consent form was for their records and the other consent form was for my records.

The data was collected using face-to-face in-depth interviews. The data from this study was collected from ten married individuals. All of the participants live in southern California so scheduling face-to-face interviews was convenient. The interviews were completed over a two week period of time. The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and 60 minutes. I conducted four interviews that lasted approximately 45 minutes, two that lasted approximately 1 hour, two that lasted approximately 35 minutes and two that lasted approximately 25 minutes. The interview questions (see Appendix D) were predetermined open ended questions that allowed for the participants to answer the questions in a more detailed and elaborate manner. Depending on how they responded to the ten predetermined questions, follow-up questions may have also been asked during the interview. All of the interviews were conducted separate and private from others.

The interviews took place in a private secure location in the education building of a private school when school was not in session. Participants were asked permission to audiotape each interview. The interviews were recorded using a digital audio recorder as well as a tape recorder to ensure that none of the interview would be lost during



recording. The use of two recording devices provided a backup just in case there was a malfunction or any part of the interview could not be heard on one of the devices.

Having two recording device systems turned out to be a great idea for collecting data because during transcription one of the devices sounded muffled during the entire interview process which made it impossible to clearly hear and therefore, understand the responses of the participants. I transcribed each interview verbatim on my personal computer using Microsoft Word and labeled appropriately. All collected data is privately stored and password protected on my personal computer which only I have access to. Following each interview, the name of each participant was removed and replaced with “participant” and assigned a number (1-10).

There was a variation in the data collection plan presented in Chapter 3. In Chapter 3, the plan was to conduct interviews in a public library but due to unavailability of a private and secure room, the location had to be changed. The interviews were conducted in a private secure room in the education building of a private school when school was not in session. The education building was opened for me by an employee of the school since the interviews were conducted after normal operating hours. A letter of cooperation was obtained giving permission to use the facility to conduct interviews for the study (see Appendix E). Other than the change of location to conduct interviews, the data collection plan described in Chapter 3 was implemented according to the plan. There were no unusual circumstances encountered during the collection of data.

### **Data Analysis**

Prior to analyzing the data that was collected, I ensured that I had properly acknowledged and addressed any potential biases that would taint the results of the analysis. As previously stated, I journaled any biases that I had prior to data collection to ensure that I was as objective as possible during analysis. I did not share any personal information with the participants during the interviews because I did not want to influence their responses in any way nor did I feel that it was necessary that I did so.

The first step in analyzing the collected data was transcribing the interviews. All of the interviews were transcribed immediately following each interview. Each interview was read at least twice before coding so that I was familiar with and understood each participant's response. The participants' responses were organized, coded, and analyzed. The data codes were written in the right margin of the transcript. The codes helped me to interpret the meanings of the responses and detect patterns and themes within the responses. A sample of some of the codes that derived from participant interview responses are listed in Table 2.

Table 2

#### *A Sample of Coding from Interview Responses*

Raw Data	Codes

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Participant 1 stated: “Learning how to resolve conflict and communicating is key.	Communicate better
Learning our love languages is something else that I didn’t know.”	Resolve conflict
	Learn love languages

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Participant 2 stated: “We were having a hard time and about to get a divorce. I to try at least one more	Marriage in turmoil
	Not willing to give up needed
	PREP was last try things.

*(table continues)*

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Raw Data	Codes
We were not ready to give up on our marriage or each other. Our family members intervened and enrolled us in PREP without our knowledge and told us that we needed to go.”	Family got involved

I went through two rounds of coding in an attempt to reduce the number of codes. The first round of codes included all of the codes from the interviews. The second round of coding included only the codes that were different from other codes. During the second round of coding, the codes that were similar or identical to other codes were combined and renamed under a different code to capture the essence of the different codes. During the coding process, I found data that was irrelevant to the study and therefore was not addressed in the coding process. An example of irrelevant data that was presented in the interview was a participant speaking of his desire to minister to other

couples. He explains “I’ve never considered myself an evangelist. I’ve never considered myself walking the streets. I would say that might be a cop out.” This excerpt from the interview did not add directly to his experience in PREP marital counseling or his feeling of marital satisfaction so it was not included in coding and therefore discarded.

After the interviews were coded, I looked for emerging themes. The themes were developed during analysis to categorize and organize the participants’ responses. I identified emerging themes based on how many presented similar responses. A theme emerged when at least 5 of the 10 participants made consistent and relevant statements.

Table 3 lists the emerging themes that developed from the codes from the participants’ responses.

Table 3

*Themes Derived from Participants’ Responses*

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*RQ: Experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling program*

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Theme 1: Turmoil/Crisis in marriage led to participating in PREP.

Theme 2: Feelings about PREP.

Theme 3: Effective Communication.

Theme 4: Support during and after PREP.

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*RQ: How do individuals who are married and who participate in PREP describe their marital satisfaction?*

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Theme 5: Marital satisfaction.

Theme 6: Tools gained from PREP.

Theme 7: Challenges in marital satisfaction.

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I used my personal laptop computer to store and analyzed the collected data. All identifiable information was removed from the data prior to transcription. Copious notes were taken using the audio recordings after each interview was completed. All collected data were kept private and confidential. The collected data remained securely on my personal laptop computer that required a password in order to access the data. No one other than I had access to the data that required a privately secured password. Audio recordings, field notes, and any other source used to collect the data were stored in a locked cabinet in my home office. No one other than I have access to the data stored in the locked cabinet.

### **Evidence of Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, several methods are available for assessing validity of the findings (Whittemore, Chase, & Mandle, 2001). In this study I employed such methods as triangulation, member checking, and rich, clarifying researcher bias, thick description, and discrepant cases.

### **Credibility**

Member checking is a method that I employed in order to assess the validity of the study. I scheduled a time to hand deliver to each participant the transcription of their interview. I provided the each participant with their transcribed interview to ensure that the data collected was a true and accurate representation of their thoughts and feelings. I reminded each participant that they would be given one week to respond to me if they did not feel that the transcribed interview was an accurate representation of their responses during the interview. I also informed the participants that if they were satisfied with the

representation of their responses, it was not necessary to respond to me. None of the participants responded to me at any time to inform me either that they were satisfied with the representation of their responses or that the representation of their responses were inaccurate. Since I was not contacted by any of the participants regarding their responses, I assumed that the responses were accurately depicted in the transcripts that I hand delivered to the participants.

Another method used to ensure trustworthiness of the study was triangulation. I used many sources to collect the data for the study such as notetaking, audio recording, and interview questions. Notes were taken immediately following each interview. I chose not to take notes during the interview because I wanted to appear focused and intently listening to the entirety of the responses. I also wanted the participants to feel free to respond to the questions without being distracted by me taking notes or feeling like I was distracted because I was taking notes. Notetaking included verbal and nonverbal observations. Although I was audio-recording the interviews, I wanted to take notes of some of the key responses and the facial expressions and body movements that the participants displayed while responding to the questions. I knew that I had reached saturation in the responses when I realized that I was not gaining any new information from the participants. I did pay attention to discrepant data which will be discussed in detail in the findings section because I think that they are noteworthy. The discrepant data answers the question of the experiences of participating in PREP and perceived marital satisfaction.

I also bracketed my personal beliefs and ideas about participating in marriage counseling programs as a method to ensure credibility of the study and the findings. One of my bracketing assumptions was that PREP marital counseling would be effective in providing tools to individuals in order to maintain marital satisfaction. I assumed that the tools gained during participation in PREP would lend to a positive experience in the program for those who participated. Bracketing helped me be aware of these assumptions which allowed me to address my biases and create an objective interviewing environment. I bracketed my biases by journaling about my assumptions daily for a week prior to collecting data. Journaling my assumptions provided an opportunity to acknowledge and address the biases.

### **Transferability**

I provided rich, thick descriptions of the data collected as another strategy used to ensure validity of the study. I used probing questions following each interview question in order to elicit more detailed responses from the participants. By asking the interview questions and probing the responses, I was able to collect more vivid data thus enabling me to provide a thick description of each participant's experience. I provided verbatim transcripts with detailed descriptions of the experiences of the participants. I included notes in the margins of the transcripts that provided themes and direct quotes from the participants. Although the phenomenon was described in detailed, due to the small size and very specific nature of the study, it is unlikely that the findings of this study will be transferable to other studies or participants.

**Dependability**

I used the individual interview responses and interview notes to gain dependability of the study. Immediately following each interview, I took notes to ensure that no data were lost in case the audio failed to work properly. The notes included key responses that I think were necessary in analyzing the results in case of equipment failure. I also journaled immediately after each interview my observations and thoughts of each interview and participant for my own reflection of the experience as well as to monitor my subjectivity and biases. The interview was audio-recording on two devices just in case there was equipment failure on one device I would have another device available. The interviews were later transcribed verbatim from the audio-recording device.

**Confirmability**

I truly think highly of counselors and people seeking counselors for assistance whenever they feel like they cannot handle life's situations alone. I believe that marriage counseling is very effective in challenging couples to reach the level in their marriages that they strive for. Since this study was based on PREP marital counseling, I understand that I have biases that could have tainted the research outcome if not carefully managed. In order to address my biases prior to conducting the interviews, I wrote reflexive journal entries daily for a week where I documented my feelings, thoughts, and beliefs about the study, the program, and my expectations. This process allowed me to address any subjective feelings that I have and remain neutral while conducting the interviews. I made sure that I was nonjudgmental and objective about the responses from the participants. I understood that other individuals who participated in PREP may have had



experiences that were different from my experiences and I respected those differences. I also made sure that I did not lead any participants to respond to the interview questions in a way that would be favorable to the outcome of the study.

The discrepant data was considered while interpreting the participants' descriptions of their experiences and will be discussed in detail in the findings section. The statements provided by the participants were beneficial in identifying emerging themes which provided answers to the two research questions that guided the study.

### **Findings**

The research questions guided the formation of the interview questions and the process of the data analysis. The data collection and analysis process included 10 participants who provided an understanding of their lived experiences while participating in PREP and their perceived feelings of marital satisfaction. The responses of the participants were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word. The data is password protected on my personal computer which only I have access to. Interview questions 1–7 addressed research question 1 which explores the experiences of married individuals who participate in PREP marital counseling. Interview questions 8, 9, and 10 addressed Research Question 2 which asked how married individuals who participated in PREP marital counseling perceive and describe satisfaction in their marriage. All names were removed from data and replaced with “participant” and a number (1-10) in order to ensure confidentiality of the participants (e.g. Participant 1, Participant 2, Participant 3, and so on).

Several themes emerged during data analysis. The specific statements that the participants repeated the most led to the 7 emerging themes that developed (e.g., 5 or more consistent statements that were expressed by the participants represented a theme). These statements provided evidence that supported how personal expectations and experiences can affect how individuals perceive PREP and marital satisfaction. The statements represented by the participants also supported the conceptual framework that guided the study, SET. The themes that developed from the participants' statements are reported in subsequent paragraphs.

#### **Theme 1: Turmoil/Crisis in marriage led to participating in PREP.**

The participants were asked what led them to participate in PREP. This question helps to provide an understanding of what motivated the participants to participate in this program. I wanted to know if the participants chose to participate in PREP for preventive or intervention purposes. Knowing the motivation of the participants will give some insight into their expectations and experiences in PREP. All of the participants were led to participate in PREP as a result of some form of disconnect from their spouse. The reasons for participation in PREP ranged from wanting to spend more time with a spouse according to participant 1 to being separated from a spouse and deciding whether to give the marriage another try according to participant 5. Participant 1 stated that he and his wife were "married for 35 years and looking for a way to reconnect and spend more time together." He felt that participating in PREP would be a "good way for to reconnect, spend more time together, and learn tools to use in our marriage" to maintain marital satisfaction. Participant 5 expressed that "we were in crisis in our marriage." He and his

wife were separated from one another and wanted to give their marriage another attempt.

They thought that “participating in PREP would be the best thing for us at this time.”

## **Theme 2: Feelings about PREP.**

The participants were asked what their feelings about counseling were prior to participating in PREP. This question may provide insight into how open the participants may be to the counseling process based on prior feelings. The participants’ feelings about counseling prior to participating in PREP may influence their experience in PREP.

For example, if they had negative feelings about counseling prior to participating in PREP, they may enter PREP expecting to have a negative experience in PREP.

Participant 1 had a positive view of counseling prior to participating in PREP, saying that “investing in our marriage has always been our top priority by participating in marriage retreats and marriage conferences.” Participant 7 had a negative view of counseling prior to participating in PREP based on previous premarital counseling experience. She felt that “it was generic and not specific to their concerns and issues.” These negative feelings made her apprehensive about what her experience might be while participating in PREP. Participant 5 felt after participating in counseling for over a year that “she needed more.” She felt that one on one counseling was not effective and that PREP would provide a setting where she and the other participants could “do life together.”

Participant 3 also had a negative view of counseling prior to participating in PREP after being told that after 1 ½ years “there was nothing else the counselor could do for her and her husband and they should separate.” Due to her feelings about counseling prior to

PREP, she was pessimistic about her experience in PREP.

### **Theme 3: Effective Communication.**

The participants were asked to give me examples of tools/strategies that they learned while participating in PREP and how they might use them. I asked this question in order to gain an understanding of whether or not they felt that they were benefitting from participating in PREP and whether they are using these tools/strategies in their marriages. All 10 participants gave examples of tools/strategies that they learned during their participation in PREP. The most common responses to this question were communicating better with the spouse and focusing more on making himself or herself a better person before focusing negatively on the spouse. All 10 participants included better communication in some part of their response to this question. Participant 7 simply stated that, “understanding that your spouse doesn’t have bad intentions, even if what he says upsets you, can improve our communication and marriage.” Participant 8 stated that, “not focusing on what irritates you about your spouse or what irritates him about me and focusing on making our relationship better through effective communication and the word of God” will help us during difficult times. Participant 4 stated:

I’ve learned how to be an effective listener. I have to be anxious to listen over speaking. That’s the biggest challenge for my wife and I is communicating especially if things get a little challenging. We usually just wanted to get our points across and we didn’t really listen. We were listening for an opportunity to get our say.

If individuals feel like they have learned tools and strategies while participating in PREP but they are not effective when having difficult times, they may believe that what they have learned is useless, and as a result, feel as though they have not gained anything. The feeling that the time spent participating in PREP has been wasted which can negatively impact their perceived experience in PREP. Participant 3 emphasized the importance of “listening to what my spouse is really saying before responding and then respond appropriately based on my spouse’s intent and not based on my own personal feelings.” According to Participant 4, “One of the most important strategies that I’ve learned and implement in my marriage is to just be quiet. Give attention to what’s being said so that I can respond appropriately. I always say act instead of reacting.” All 10 participants reported that they have used the tools/strategies gained during participating in PREP and that the tools/strategies have been effective in getting them through difficult times in their marriage. Participant 9 stated that: “I’ve learned that when things start to come up just take a step back, say a quick prayer, and not address it at the time because all of the emotions are involved. Seek the word of God and then go from there.”

#### **Theme 4: Support during and after PREP.**

The participants were asked if they felt supported and understood while participating in PREP. This question was asked to directly gain an understanding of what the participants experienced during their participation in PREP. If they had a feeling of support and understanding, then they might tend to perceive their experience in PREP in a positive way. If they did not feel supported or understood during their participation in

PREP, it might be expected that they would perceive their experience in a negative way. Not only did all ten participants feel supported and understood while participating in PREP, but they still feel supported after completing the program. Each participant discussed their individual ongoing support from the facilitator and others in the program. Participant 10 spoke specifically about being able to call someone from the program at any time and receive a response within hours offering assistance. The assistance has come in the form of a phone call as well as a home visit late at night. Participant 10 stated:

We can always call and there are some things that I can't talk to my husband about and I have Godly married women that I can go to. They help give me advice or tell me I was wrong in certain situations.

Participant 9 stated that, "there's always someone that I can call and they will be there." Participant 2 spoke of multiple times "when I needed to speak to the facilitator immediately regarding difficulties in my marriage and the facilitator responded immediately." Other participants shared examples of times when the facilitator or other participants visited them in their homes during late night hours to counsel them. For example, Participant 6 described a time when:

My wife and I were having a bit of a conflict. We called the facilitator and he came over and sat down with us and explained some

things to us and shined some light on some aspects of our disagreement and it has helped.

Participant 8 spoke of a time when:

A couple came to my house in the middle of the week and stayed until 1:00 in the morning pouring life and advice into us and praying for us until my husband and I both felt better about our conflict.

When asked what could have been done to make you feel more supported while participating in PREP, Participant 1 simply said “nothing.” He felt that the facilitator and others in the program went out of their way to make him and his wife feel supported. Participant 8 stated that she never felt that more could have been done to make her feel supported. She went on to say “I knew that if I was going through something in my marriage and needed intervention help was just one text or phone call away.” Participant 7 responded that “when we sent out a text about having a rough day we always got a text back saying we’re praying for you.” She also expressed that “the class was very diverse, including couples who have been married for many years, couples who have been married for months, and engaged couples, which allowed for support from couples in different stages of marriage.”

#### **Theme 5: Marital satisfaction**

The participants were asked to define and describe what marital satisfaction means to them. This question was asked to address the participants' perceived marital satisfaction. How participants define and describe marital satisfaction will provide and understanding of their ideals of marital satisfaction. Marital satisfaction is defined and described in various ways by many of the participants. For example, Participant 1 described marital satisfaction in a biblical way. He stated that he wanted to "get back to the garden experience that is spoken about in Genesis which involves oneness, complete trust, being able to walk in unity, and meeting my spouse's needs before she even knows what they are." Participant 2 vowed to never having marital satisfaction because that resembles contentment to me in my marriage. She said "I don't want to be stagnant. God wants you to always keep that water flowing. Stagnant water is going to cause mold and mildew. We don't want that. We want to flow to higher callings."

The other participants described and defined marital satisfaction in similar ways. Participant 1 defined marital satisfaction as "walking together as one in unity, complete trust, to think each other's thoughts, and to be able to be there for each other's needs before you even know what they are." Participant 3 described marital satisfaction to her as "having good communication, intimacy, and passion." Participant 4 described marital satisfaction to him as "mutual companionship, consideration for each other's needs and wants with an emphasis on God as the center, and wanting to please God." Participant 6 defined marital satisfaction to her as simply "happiness and peace within the home."



Marital satisfaction to some participants include having the same morals and values, having good communication and having a good intimate relationship. Participant 10 stated “our marriage will be satisfied as long as we have the same morals and values.” Participant 7 responded “I think it really starts where your values are so for us our marital satisfaction definitely comes from the Lord then everything else revolves around that.”

#### **Theme 6: Tools gained from PREP.**

The participants were asked how participating in PREP has contributed to their ideals of marital satisfaction. This question was asked to address the participants’ perceived marital satisfaction after participating in PREP and whether their participation has contributed to their definition of marital satisfaction. Many participants reported that participating in PREP has contributed to their definition of marital satisfaction. Participating in PREP has helped them to have realistic expectations of their spouse and their marriage. Participant 3 described being stubborn to her spouse’s needs prior to participating in PREP. She states that “as a result of my participation, I now understand that my husband and I have different but equally important perspectives about our marriage and both perspectives deserves consideration.” Participant 10 discussed now understanding the roles of a husband and of a wife. “I was the dominant one in my marriage and didn’t fully allow my husband to be the man in our home. I now understand that in order to achieve marital satisfaction in my marriage, we each have to have our roles and fulfill the commitment defined by each role.”

#### **Theme 7: Challenges in marital satisfaction.**

The participants were asked whether participating in PREP has challenged their ideals of marital satisfaction. Many of the couples realize that they had unrealistic expectations of their spouses prior to participating in PREP. Participant 2 described her challenges since participating in PREP stating:

before participating in PREP, my knowledge of marital satisfaction was based on what I saw on television. I believe that I was brainwashed to believe that being satisfied in my marriage meant that my husband's role was to buy me whatever I wanted. I have to constantly remind myself that being satisfied in my marital is about more than my needs being met but about both of our needs being met.

Participant 4 described his challenge in maintaining marital satisfaction which includes “not walking away from difficult situations but making a conscious effort to stay and work through the difficult times in an effective manner.” This is a tool that he learned as a result of participating in PREP. Participant 6 spoke about the challenge of not reverting back to behaviors before he participated in PREP. He questions, “when certain things happen in my marriage, if I really have to behave or respond a certain way in order to maintain marital satisfaction.” He continues to be challenged by his previous definition of marital satisfaction.

### **Discrepant Cases**

Some of the statements that were made by the participants were isolated but worth mentioning. Participant 2 stated that individual counseling is not effective and therefore should not be an option for couples struggling in their marriage. She stated that “individual counseling rehashes all of the negative things that have led us to seeking counseling, therefore making it difficult to move forward in our marriage.” Secondly, Participant 10 feels that “marital satisfaction is not about the two individuals involved in the marriage. She feels that marital satisfaction is not about her or her husband’s happiness. She believes that marriages are doomed if they focus on receiving happiness and satisfaction from their spouse.” Lastly, Participant 6 believes that “turning to the bible or praying to God daily will maintain a successful and satisfied married which, in their marriages, has been more effective than counseling, retreats, or marriage books.” Participant 8 also stated that “without seeking the Lord, it’s not possible to truly have a successful or satisfying marriage.” Participant 3 expressed the difficulty he has “understanding how marriages survive without including the bible and prayer in their daily routine.”

### **Summary of Chapter 4**

I attempted to provide an understanding of the experiences of married individuals who had participated in PREP as well as their reported perceived marital satisfaction demonstrated in Chapter 4. The study revealed that the individual participants had positive experiences in PREP. One participant revealed not seeking marital satisfaction while others revealed daily efforts to acquire and maintain marital satisfaction in their

marriage. The statements discussed in Chapter 4 were taken from individual interviews from the participants that were transcribed verbatim. The statements were grouped into themes that represented each research question. Member checking, notetaking, and audio recording were implemented to increase the validity of the study.

The findings from question 1 revealed that all of the participants chose to participate in PREP because a feeling of needs not completely being met by the spouse and not feeling completely satisfied in their marriage. Question 2 revealed that most of the participants had participated in some form of marriage counseling previously that was believed to not have effectively met their needs and therefore they were led to try something else. For Questions 3-5, all of the participants felt that they received the tools necessary to get them through difficult times in their marriage. They also reported feeling supported and understood during the entire program as well as after the program ended in questions 6-7. These participants reported very positive experiences while participating in PREP. They provided many examples that supported their feelings of unconditional support and understanding. Questions 8-10, provided an understanding of the perception of marital satisfaction. The participants similarly described their perception of marital satisfaction including effective communication, realistic expectations and beliefs about marriage, and good morals and values. Participant 2 described “never seeking marital satisfaction in her marriage due to a feeling of contentment in the marriage.” She believes that “anyone who achieves marital satisfaction is just married.” The challenges for the participants included understanding

that “it’s not about them” but they have to consider their spouses before they consider themselves. Participant 6 sees maintaining “new behaviors as a challenge” when he feels compelled to revert back to old behaviors when seeking marital satisfaction. The responses from the participants revealed themes in the findings.

The research questions will be further explored in Chapter 5. The interpretation of findings, implications for social change, recommendations for actions and recommendations for further study will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5.

## Chapter 5: Discussion, Conclusions, and Recommendations

### Introduction

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore and understand the experiences of married individuals who had participated in the PREP marital counseling program and explore their feelings of the effectiveness of the program related to marital satisfaction. While the effectiveness of marriage counseling programs is known, the gap in the literature is understanding the experiences of the individuals who participate in PREP and how they perceive marital satisfaction. Understanding the participants' experiences and perceptions of marital satisfaction may offer providers of PREP the data that they may use to improve the design and facilitation of the program. The experiences of 10 heterosexual married individuals were explored through in-depth individual interviews. The 10 participants were located using the criterion sampling method. Each interview was audiotape recorded and transcribed verbatim.

The themes that emerged from data analysis represented the participants' experiences and their perceived feelings of marital satisfaction while participating in the PREP marital counseling program. These emerging themes included what led the participants to participate in PREP, previous counseling experience, effective communication, level of support, how the participants describe marital satisfaction, and how PREP contributed to or challenged the perceptions of marital counseling.

Turmoil and crisis in marriage led the participants to participate in PREP. Participants were experiencing infidelity, ineffective communication, separation with a

certain possibility of divorce, and feeling disconnected in their marriages. The participants felt that participating in PREP was a necessary step in order to save their marriages. The participants also had unrealistic expectations of marriage and of their spouses. One participant expressed her expectation of her spouse was to make her happy by buying her things and that would create satisfied marriage. The participants stated that they learned that through PREP that effective communication, similar values, and realistic expectations and beliefs are necessary in maintaining marital satisfaction.

### **Interpretation of the Findings**

The data for this study was collected through individual interviews conducted with 10 participants. The interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed. The analysis of the data led to the formation of 7 emerging themes

#### **Theme 1: Turmoil or Crisis in Marriage led to Participating in PREP**

The

participants in this study ranged from newly married to thirty two years married when they decided to participate in PREP. As previously mentioned, PREP was designed to increase happiness and lower the chances of divorce (Markman, et al., 2010). Seven of the 10 participants were in a place of feeling like this was the last chance to save their marriage. Participant 2 stated “we were going to get a divorce because there was no way of salvaging anything prior to this class.” Participant 3 stated “we were going to get a divorce then we found out about this program.” Participant 4 stated “we were in crisis in our marriage and wanted to move forward in a positive so we decided to try PREP as a last attempt.” Participant 5 stated “we were separated and moving toward divorce and

my husband saw information about the class and we had to try it before we called it quits.” Participant 6 stated “we had been separated for 2 months and my wife found out about the program and told me to come with her to give our marriage one more try.”

Participant 8 stated “my husband and I were struggling all 7 years of our marriage and began looking for a program to help us get out of this rut and we found PREP.”

Participant 9 stated “we had some issues and heading for divorce when we started looking for extra help and found this class.”

The overall reason for the participants in this study to participate in PREP is supported in the literature where couples who seek marriage counseling programs are looking for immediate answers that will help them get through difficult times (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993). Participant 1 expressed “feeling a sense of disconnection from his spouse.” As a result he believed that “participating in PREP would not only make them feel connected to their spouse again but it would also remind them of why they got married in the first place and hopefully reignite the fire in their marriage.”

The seriousness of the issues ranged from very poor communication to living in two different homes. Things were so severe for Participant 2 that her family got involved in helping them to resolve their issues. The family members intervened by signing them up for PREP without them knowing and begging them to attend. The family members explained how important it was to let professionals help them get through the difficult times that they were having. Participant 7 began the program after just one year of marriage. The participant reported the difficulties she had getting her husband to understand that “his family is no longer the priority and that I am now his priority.” She



described feeling that “every decision that he made was to make his mother happy and she was not considered in the decision making process.” She felt that they both needed guidance and direction in their marriage which is what ultimately led them to participating in PREP.

It is not unusual for couples to get to the point of considering separation or divorce before seeking help. Many couples wait about 6 years of having serious issues in their marriage before seeking help in their marriages (Gottman & Gottman, 1999). This is due to the belief that things will get better without the need for marriage counseling (Bringle & Byers, 1997).

## **Theme 2: Feelings about PREP**

The PREP program is a skill based marriage preparation program that provide couples with understanding and knowledge and the opportunity to practice tools gained in their relationships and receive feedback (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). All of the participants expressed a positive experience in PREP. Participant 1 described the program as “beneficial in providing the tools necessary in maintaining marriages that the bible describes which includes effectively communicating with one another.” Participant 7 spoke about PREP helping to understand what it means to have “realistic expectations” about her spouse. Participant 4 learned the importance of “being honest and open with spouse” while participating in PREP. Participant 8 stated “sometimes putting your feelings second to the needs of the marriage” was a tool that she learned in PREP that is beneficial in her marriage. None of the participants expressed not receiving valuable information for their marriages. Participant 3 expressed an understanding of

“the work that it takes to maintain marital satisfaction” that she gained in PREP.

Individuals who participate in PREP may have increased effective communication, realistic beliefs and expectations, and improved relational skills (Markman, et al., 2010)

At the conclusion of PREP, participant 1 felt that he and his wife were in a better place in their marriage than before participating in PREP stating, “I’m more focused on the purpose of marriage and knowing that God ordained it and we don’t need to be discussing separation or divorce.” According to Sullivan (2001), marriage satisfaction is a happy and stable marriage that is less likely to experience divorce. Many participating had either never considered marital satisfaction before, could not define marital satisfaction, or had an unrealistic definition of marital satisfaction prior to participating in PREP. Marital satisfaction is defined by whether marital goals and expectations are met (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001). Participant 4 responded to the question about defining marital satisfaction by saying “Wow. That’s big. I’ve never really thought about that before.” Participant 6 responded to the same question by saying “um, marital satisfaction to me would just be a happy life but I haven’t really thought about exactly what that looks like.” Participant 2 thought that marital satisfaction was about what a man should do for her to make her happy stating “I was brainwashed to think that a man should buy me things and do things for me to be in a satisfying marriage.” All 10 participants described feeling optimistic about the future of their marriages. Participant 3 expressed that “Me and my husband will still have conflicts and issues but things come together so much better now than before participating in PREP because we now the tools to help get us through those difficult times.” Participant 4 expressed “when difficult

times arise we have chosen to stay and work through it and that helps us to get through any difficult situation which gives us hope for the future.” Participant 7 expressed “conditioning my mind to believe or not believe that an action that was taken towards me by my spouse was intentional or just had a rough day at work helps me to know how I should respond to my spouse which is a beneficial tools that I learned in the program.”

### **Theme 3: Effective Communication.**

As discussed in Chapter 2, PREP consists of lessons that cover topics related to decreasing risk factors (eg., recognizing communication danger signs that threaten relationship safety, learning communication and conflict management skills, learning problem solving skills) and increasing protective factors (eg., fun, friendship, commitment, support, sensuality) (Markman et al., 2010). All 10 participants had expressed the issues that they had experienced by not communicating effectively with their spouses. Participant 1 expressed “how important it is for me to understand that it’s not always about me. I don’t need to always be winning. When we have a conflict we have to talk about it.” Participant 4 described how “we did a poor job of listening to each other and instead thinking about what we were going to say.” Participant 9 stated that “I would shut down during difficult times. Instead of discussing the issues with my spouse and I would internalize my feelings and thoughts.” Participating in PREP taught the participants how to create an environment that fosters open and honest communication without fear of being judged or shut down. Participant 5 stated that “we practice not just listening to each other but hearing and understanding what’s being said so that we can respond appropriately.” All 10 of the participants believe that effective communication is

imperative in maintaining marital satisfaction. Positive communication includes positive affect, problem solving skills, support/validation, and communication which positively influences relationships (Markman, Stanley, et al., 2010). Participant 5 stated that “a happy marriage is us really listening to each other and considering my spouse before myself.”

#### **Theme 4: Support during and after PREP.**

Individuals who are ready to make positive changes in their relationships outside of the counseling environment and who are flexible with themselves and each other are the ideal participants in PREP (Markman et al., 2010). Participants who are least suited for PREP are individuals who are not committed to making their marriage work (Markman et al., 2010). The participants used every opportunity both inside and outside of PREP to work through issues with the help of the facilitator in order to benefit the most from PREP. The participants were ready to make positive changes in their relationships and welcomed the outside support from the facilitator and others involved in PREP. The facilitator of PREP made every effort to be available during times of need for the participants. PREP focuses on teaching conflict management skills, confronting and dealing with issues in the relationship, and creating and maintaining a healthy and happy relationship (Markman et al., 2010). The facilitator worked hard to ensure that the participants not only learned these tools but also implemented them properly and effectively in their marriages at the appropriate times. He achieved this goal by being available for advice or perspective during difficult times and always making the participants feel safe to share and supported whether the facilitator agreed with them or

not. There were many statements from the participants that expressed their appreciation for the facilitator's unlimited support and availability shown to them during very difficult times. Participant 6 gave an example of "having a conflict with my spouse and calling the facilitator. The facilitator not only helped us work through the issue that we were having but he did that by visiting us in our home and working with us face to face in our environment." Participant 4 stated that "whenever I reached out to the facilitator or any other participant in PREP to gain perspective about issues or concerns in my marriage, I always received a response that offered something of value." Participant 2 stated "even at the beginning of the program, I felt like I was a part of a family and I always received support." She went on to share an example by stating "when I was sick and couldn't get in touch with my husband at work and I was offered a ride to the hospital by many individuals in the program." The support that the participants received help them to work through issues in their marriages more effectively. Participant 10 discussed a time when she and her husband decided that she would work and he would stay home with the children. She received unlimited support from a couple in the program who "were in the same situation where the husband stayed home to take care of the children and they helped us get through this trying time in our marriage." Participant 9 stated:

we can always call or text someone in the program to get  
their perspective on any issues that my wife and I may be  
going through. They let us know whether or not they think  
that we could have handled situations differently.

This feeling of support and available helped get the participants through troubling times and therefore gave them hope about the future of their relationships. According to Tambling et al. (2014), positive views about improvements in the relationship often leads to positive feelings about counseling.

### **Theme 5: Marital Satisfaction.**

According to Sullivan (2001), marital satisfaction is described as a happy and stable marriage that is less likely to experience divorce. Many couples define marital satisfaction based on whether they think that their partner is generally happy or satisfied with the marriage and the spouse (Schumm et al., 1986). The participants defined marital satisfaction in various ways. Participant 7 described marital satisfaction as “where your values are which come from the Lord.” She believes that she will have a satisfying marriage as long as she and her husband maintain the same morals and values.

Participant 4 described marital satisfaction “as a reflection of God.” Participant 1 believes that as long as he and his wife are “serving God and their marriage is a light to other couples” they will be satisfied in their marriage. Participant 10 believes that “marital satisfaction has nothing to do with her own personal happiness because their happiness comes from God.” Participant 8 believes that “my husband and I and every couple should make God the cornerstone of our marriage because I think that it is virtually impossible to have a satisfying marriage without him.” Participant 3 describe marital satisfaction as “effectively communicating with your spouse, considering your spouse above yourself, and having intimacy and passion with your spouse.” She believes

that “without these elements in the marriage they will never reach the level of true satisfaction in their marriage”, which is found in research by Markman and Hahlweg (1993) which states that communication plays a significant role in marital satisfaction. These participants felt that their definitions of marital satisfaction were sufficient and did not need to be adjusted, however participant 2 believed that her description of marital satisfaction needed a lot of adjusting due to the descriptions being unrealistic. Participant 2 described marital satisfaction based on how it is depicted in movies. She stated, “I was expecting my husband to meet all of my needs by buying me things and taking me on fancy trips, and doing any and everything for me without any hesitation or expectations from me.” Research states that marital satisfaction is possible if the individual believes that his or her marital expectations and needs are met (Campbell, Simpson, Kashy, & Fletcher, 2001).

#### **Theme 6: Tools gain from PREP**

When asked how participating in PREP contributed to the ideals of marital satisfaction, the participants responded very similarly. Overall the participants agreed that participating in PREP contributed to how they defined marital satisfaction. Participating in PREP has helped them to become aware and understand the perspectives of their spouse. In other words, they had to “look into the lens” of their spouse in order to understand their perspective. This perspective is supported in the literature that describes the importance of understanding what their spouse is communicating.

Understanding the perspective of your spouse provides an environment where both partners’ thinking is aligned with each other and their able to come up with creative

solutions for their issues (Li et al., 2008). Participant 1 learned that “it is not always about me and I have to sometimes put my wife’s needs above my own needs.”

Participant 5 stated that “I learned not to just hear what my husband has to say but I now listen and understand his concerns.”

The participants also reported learning how to be accountable for their words and actions. The program reminded participant 1 about “the purpose of marriage” and he and his wife “should be doing everything in their power to make it a success.” The PREP program is a skills-based marriage program that not only promotes understanding and knowledge but also provides opportunities to practice relationship skills and receive feedback on their skills (Halford, Markman, Kline, & Stanley, 2003). Marriage is of particular concern to pastoral care because of its centrality to congregational life (Hook et al., 2011). Participants with strong religious beliefs were able to relate what they have learned to the bible and what God says about marriage. For example, Participant 10 said “when in conflict, we pray”, Participant 9 said “I’ve learned to love my wife as the Lord loved the church”, Participant 1 expressed the desire to “go out and minister to other couples in trouble”, and Participant 2 described “going to God before going to my husband to address issues for air and not relying on my husband for that breath because if I do then we’re both going to die because we’re both trying to breathe from one oxygen tank.”

When conflicts arise, Participant 9 reported that “I am not so quickly to revert back to old behaviors which causes me to try harder to implement the tools that I’ve have learned to my marriage.” Fighting fair, compromise, giving in, being gentle, being



positive, and sometimes waiting to address issues for a better time are all important components of effective conflict resolution skills that are supported in the literature (Gottman, Gottman, DeClair, 2006).

**Theme 7: Challenges in marital satisfaction.**

The challenges that many of the participants reported were understanding that how they were behaving in their marriage was probably not the most effective way to have a satisfying marriage. Some of the participants came to PREP with resistance about trying new things because they were convinced that what they were doing was correct but their spouse what doing was causing the issues in their marriage. Participant 8 came to PREP thinking that what she was doing was perfect and that “my husband just did not measure up to my expectations.” She felt that due to her unrealistic beliefs she had made a bad decision stating, “I thought that I had made a mistake marrying and was thinking about getting a divorce” which supports the notion that if expectations are unfavorable towards the spouse, he or she may disengage completely from the relationship (Gordon & Baucom, 2009). Research also finds that unrealistic beliefs and expectations lead to dissatisfaction in marriage which may lead to divorce if the couple does not have the tools necessary to help them through difficult times (Dillard, Midboe, & Klein, 2009). PREP helped her to realize that she was not perfect partner in her marriage and they both had a role in the state of their marriage. The main challenge that seemed to continue to appear in the interview is reverting back to what was comfortable rather than pushing themselves to be the person in the marriage that they should be. How people resolve conflicts and how consistent they are when resolving conflicts is very important in

relationships (Sternberg & Dobson, 1987). Using the tools learned in PREP to ensure that the individuals do not revert to old behaviors and effectively and consistently resolve conflicts will help to facilitate a positive more satisfying marriage. Another challenge that the participants spoke about was making sure that their marriage is always number one over family and friends. This is seen as a challenge because sometimes the people closest to you don't always understand that the relationship will change. According to research individuals usually look for qualities in a romantic relationship that they look for in a best friend which shows the importance of friendship in marriage (Laner & Russell, 1998). Maintaining a strong friendship with a spouse and making him or her the priority over others will increase the possibility of a satisfied marriage.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study helped to fill the research gap that existed in understanding the experiences of married individuals who participated in PREP and how they perceived and described marital satisfaction at the conclusion of participation in PREP. Social exchange theory explains how individuals interact and make decisions in relationships. According to Miller and Bermudez (2004), individuals choose relationships and maintain relationships with others based on whether they believe that the benefits of being in the relationship outweigh the costs of being in the relationship. The participants in this study believed that there was a greater benefit to stay in the marriage and work on maintaining a satisfying marriage with their spouse. Even if some of the participants felt like they had come to a crossroad in their relationship, they believed that continuing to work on the marriage was more important than divorce. As previously stated, some of the

participants were living in separate homes from their spouses and other participants were seriously and actively discussing moving forward with divorce before deciding to participate in PREP. This program was the last option for many of the participants. After the participants decided that the benefit of making their marriage work outweighed the cost associated with dissolving it, they had to face the issues that got them to the place where they were currently in their relationship, such as poor communication, unrealistic expectations, and poor conflict resolution.

According to the SET, effective communication, realistic expectations, and conflict resolution are important components of relationships (Osborn, 2012). Couples who believe that their relationship is mutually beneficial have satisfied the important components of their relationship. Participants in this study entered the PREP program because they were not able to resolve conflicts, communicate properly, or have realistic expectations of their spouses. The commitment that the participants had to their marriage was what ultimately led them to participate in PREP. As Osborn (2012) stated, the commitment level of the SET explores the extent to which relationship satisfaction outweighs the attractiveness of alternatives to the current relationship. In other words, how committed a person is to their current relationship determines whether that person chooses to stay in the relationship and make it work or choose to leave the relationship. The participants chose to remain in their marriage and gain the skills necessary to maintain a satisfying marriage. Although the participants were experiencing difficult times in their marriages, their commitment encouraged them to give PREP a try.

Participant 2 “had family members intervene and enrolled us in PREP without our knowledge.” Participant 3 stated that “literally 3-4 months ago were going to get a divorce and I finally said I have to give PREP a try.” Participants 4 and 5 were both “separated and moving towards divorce.” The participants learned how to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, express their feelings to their spouse openly and honestly, and sometimes put their spouse’s need before theirs as a result of participating in PREP. In order to achieve mutual satisfaction and benefit in the relationship, he or she must appropriately implement the tools that he or she has into the marriage. According to the SET, when both partners in the relationship believe that they have received the benefits that they deserve, they have achieved mutual benefit in the relationship (Miller & Bermudez, 2004).

### **Limitations of the Study**

A limitation of the study was that all of the participants in this study were in their first marriage. Individuals who had been married before may have experienced PREP differently than those in their first marriages. Therefore the results of how the individuals perceived PREP, marital satisfaction, and their experience in PREP may be different for individuals who have been married before and divorced than for individuals who may be experiencing the need for marital counseling for the first time.

In this study I attempted to understand the experiences of individuals who have participated in PREP; therefore, the results cannot be generalized to individuals who have not participated in PREP. Other marriage counseling programs may be designed and implemented differently than PREP. Therefore individuals who participate in other

marriage programs may have a different experience than individuals who have participated in PREP. Participants must have also participated in PREP in the last year.

The results of the study cannot be generalized to individuals who have not participated in PREP in the last year due to the possible inability to accurately recall and report their experiences while participating in the program.

All of the participants in the study were in heterosexual marriages. Individuals from more culturally diverse environments may have provided a different perspective on their experiences of PREP and how they describe marital satisfaction. Also the participants could not be married to other participants in the study because of the possible stress that participating in a study of this nature could have on a marriage. Therefore the results cannot be generalized to marriages other than heterosexual marriages or to married couples who both participate in similar studies.

The participants in this study experience marriage based on the biblical description of what marriage should be and how each married individual should behave in their marriage. Individuals who describe themselves as religious may experience marriage in a biblical way which may influence their experiences in PREP as well as how they perceive marital satisfaction.

The phenomenological design presented a limitation in terms of broader quantitative assessment of understanding the experiences of the participants and their feelings of marital satisfaction. However, it is believed that the richness of the qualitative

approach is an important contribution to the existing literature that goes beyond what a quantitative study could provide (Lancy, 1993).

Finally, the findings of this study are limited to the data collected from the interviews, and to some extent, the researcher's interpretation. The data collected may be different or interpreted differently using another method of collecting data or person's perspective. The sample size of the study was 10 individuals. The findings were based on in depths understanding of the experiences of individual from a smaller sample size. The sample size may be seen as a limitation due to perceived difficulty in applying the findings to other populations. The recruitment process continued until saturation was reached which concluded with 10 participants.

### **Recommendation of Further Research**

Based on this qualitative research study, I recommend three areas of research for further study. One area of further study involves interviewing individuals from a broader participant pool. This study would include individuals who are not affiliated with religion. The purpose of this study would be to determine if individuals who are not described as religious would describe their experiences in PREP and their perceived feelings of marital satisfaction in a positive way.

A second area of research for further study involves a research pool that includes individuals who participated in PREP only without participating in a continuation program or class at the conclusion of PREP. The purpose of this study would be to gain a more accurate view of the experiences of individuals who participated in PREP.

Although a continuation program is beneficial to the individuals who participate in it, the experiences of PREP and the perceived feeling of marital satisfaction is not specific to PREP when participating in a continuation program or class after PREP ends. Individuals may report having more positive experiences in PREP if they continue to participate in a marriage program immediately following PREP. They may view their participation as one long program rather than two separate programs.

A final area of research for further study involves interviewing participants who are married to other participants in the study. The purpose of this study would be to explore the husband and wife perceptions of their experiences in PREP as well as how they describe the impact of participating in PREP on their marriage. Ethically, this would be a difficult study to design due to the potential marital stress that would develop. If designed in an ethical manner, the findings may add to the gap in the current literature of participating in PREP.

### **Implications of Study**

Current research provided an examination of the effectiveness of marriage counseling programs, however there is a lack of research exploring the experiences of the participants of marriage counseling. The findings of this study provided a detailed discussion of the implications of positive social change and recommendation for practice which will be addressed in the following sections.

### **Implications for Positive Social Change**

The findings of this study are not meant to be generalized across all counseling programs, but instead to provide an understanding of the experiences of married

individuals who participated in PREP and to also provide insight into how these individuals describe marital satisfaction as a result of participating in the program. It is imperative that clergy who provide marriage counseling and professional marriage counselors understand the importance of providing a supportive and safe environment which provides an opportunity to share and receive beneficial feedback from others. Currently programs typically are set up to function only during scheduled meeting hours, therefore couples are left to work through issues individually without the assistance from the facilitator or others in the program. More emphasis placed on extended hours of support for the participants may provide a more positive experience while participating in the program.

Providing extended support for the participants of PREP may give them more opportunities to practice communicating effectively with the spouse during difficult times with the direct and immediate support from the facilitator. The more time spent using the communication tools learned while participating in PREP mediated by the facilitator may increase the likelihood that effective communication may become routine in the absence of the facilitator. According to Markman et al. (2010), The PREP program consists of lessons that cover topics related to decreasing risk factors (e.g. recognizing communication danger signs that threaten relationship safety, learning communication and conflict management skills, learning problem solving skills) and increasing protective factors (e.g. fun, friendship, commitment, support, sensuality). When couples communicate effectively the likelihood of the dissolution of the marriage may be decreased and marital satisfaction may be increased. Individuals who lack



communication skills tend to withdraw or become defensive during a conflict, which predicts marital dissatisfaction and dissolution in the future (Rogge & Bradbury, 1999). Research has shown that communication and conflict management is detailed as a significant key to a successful marriage (Briks, 2003). The goal of PREP is to increase positive communication and decrease negative communication by teaching skills and providing tools necessary in maintaining marital satisfaction through effective conflict resolution. Research has shown that prevention and intervention programs teach couples the skills necessary to maintain effective communication and conflict resolution skills that will greatly influence their marriages for many years (Markman & Hahlweg, 1993).

### **Recommendations for Practice**

It is recommended that developers and implementers of PREP reexamine the current program to ensure that it is designed with the participant in mind. Reexamining the curriculum may include the experiences of past participants of PREP. Placing an emphasis on experiences of the participants as well as the potential long term effects of marital satisfaction ensures that the program is designed in a manner that allows the participants to gain the most benefits possible from PREP. As Kreider (2005) stated in Chapter 2, it is necessary to provide couples with effective intervention. There were sufficient studies discussed in Chapter 2 dedicated to the effectiveness of marriage counseling but a lack of studies exploring the experiences of the individuals participating in PREP. In order to provide couples with effective intervention, providers must offer a program that addresses the experiences of the participants which include exploring their specific needs prior to the start of the program. One way to gain this information is to

send a request by mail or email to the participant asking specific information about why they have chosen to participate in PREP and what they hope to gain as a result of participating in this program and what does satisfaction look like to them. The information provided by the participants would give the facilitator insight into the needs of the participants. This insight will allow the facilitator the opportunity to tailor the program specific to the needs and interests of the participants. While the participants in this study described an overall positive experience while participating in PREP, providing a program that addresses the specific needs and interests of the participants might improve the overall perceived experience of the individuals who participate in PREP long-term.

The recommendation for practice from this study may also provide insight towards improving the effectiveness of the current PREP, and the development and implementation of future PREP by understanding the experiences of the participants. By improving the program, therapists and counselors will be able to use PREP as another preventive educational program that can help to increase marital satisfaction for those who participate in the program, thereby reducing the divorce rate.

As a result of developing and implementing PREP in a way that demonstrates an understanding of the experiences of individuals who participate as well as the impact of PREP on marital satisfaction, individuals may consistently have a more positive experience in PREP and may also have the tools necessary to maintain long term marital satisfaction.

Another recommendation for practice from this study may include implementing supplemental programs for participants that have completed PREP. This will allow participants to have continued support, learning and practice after PREP has ended. Some participants need more reinforcement than what is provided by PREP. Being able to continue on to a supplemental marriage class may increase the perceived feeling of the participant's experience in PREP and his or her willingness to continue to implement the tools that were learned in PREP in his or her marriage after PREP has ended.

### **Conclusion**

This phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of individuals who participated in the PREP marital counseling program. Additionally, I sought to understand how each participant in PREP felt the programming affected their marital satisfaction. The goal of this study was to explore and describe individuals' experiences in the PREP program, and to ascertain their perceptions of the program's effectiveness in improving marital satisfaction and the experiences of the individuals were explored through open ended interviews. The open ended interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to speak openly and candidly about their experiences in PREP as well as how they perceived marital satisfaction following their participation in the PREP program. Generally, the participants had a favorable experience in PREP. Participants also described their feelings of marital satisfaction following the program in a positive manner. Participants felt they were able to gain the tools necessary in developing and maintaining satisfaction in their marriages.

Although I have previously facilitated marriage counseling programs, I never had the opportunity to speak directly with individual participants in order to gain knowledge about their experiences in the program. While conducting the research for this study, I had the opportunity to speak with the participants in PREP about their experiences in the marriage counseling program. Through our conversations I learned a great deal about the impact of PREP on marital satisfaction as well as what their experiences were while participating in the program. The participants shared the benefits of participating in an ongoing marriage counseling program after completing PREP. The participants shared some of the benefits such as continuously having a support system available, being able to contact the facilitator when needed, and having a weekly class that addresses issues and concerns that may arise during the week or just for maintenance. I could not help but wonder how much more effective marriage counseling programs would be overall if more programs included an ongoing supplemental program. Ongoing supplemental programs provides the opportunity for individuals to continue to address and work through issues that may need more attention. Follow up care is essential in gaining an understanding of the long term effects of marriage counseling and if the individuals actually continue to implement the tools taught in their marriage even after the program has ended. The increased knowledge from this study will help PREP facilitators better serve those who come to them for help and may serve to encourage couples to enroll in PREP programs for education and help preventing the problems that may mark the beginning of the end of a marriage.

My goal in conducting research on the experiences of the individuals who participated in PREP was due to a perceived lack of literature exploring the effectiveness of marriage counseling programs from the perspective of the individual participants. Open ended interviews and other supplemental materials were used to explore the experiences through the individuals' own words. The findings indicate that the individuals experienced support and understanding from the facilitator and other participants, tools and skills necessary to maintain a satisfying marriage, and more realistic expectations and beliefs about their spouse and marriage. Overall, the participants believed that the program met their needs. I believe that it is crucial to understand and focus on the participants when designing a marriage counseling program. I believe that developing a program that addresses the needs and interests of the participants may improve the perception of marriage counseling programs as well as increase the interest of individuals participating in such programs. The improved perception of marriage counseling programs may lead to individuals choosing to participate not as a last resort but as a means of education and prevention.

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## Appendix A: Consent Form

### Perceived Impact of Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) on Marital Satisfaction

#### Walden University

You are invited to participate in a research study of the experience of married individuals who participate in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). You were selected as a possible participant because of your experience related to the topic. Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before acting on this invitation to be in the study.

This study is being conducted by Angel Pierce, Doctoral Candidate at Walden University.

#### **Background Information:**

The purpose of this study is to better understand your experience as a participant in PREP and how you describe the satisfaction in your marriage.

#### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in one interview at the local public library in a private room for approximately 1 hour in length. Each interview will be audiotape recorded. I will ensure that the collected data accurately reflects your true thoughts and feelings by mailing your transcribed interview and allowing you the opportunity to respond by mail or in person if you feel it is not a true representation.

#### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Your participation in this study is strictly voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Walden University, your employer, or Abundant Living Family Church. If you initially decide to participate, you are still free to withdraw at any time later without affecting those relationships.

**Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. The potential benefit of participating in this study may come in the form of providing more inclusive support services.

In the event you experience stress or anxiety during your participation in the study you may terminate your participation at any time. You may refuse to answer any questions you consider invasive or stressful.

**Compensation:**

There is no form of compensation for participation.

**Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any report of this study that might be published, the researcher will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a participant. The researcher will not use your information for any purposes outside of this research project. Research records will be kept in a locked file; only the researcher will have access to the records.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is Angel Pierce. The researcher's advisor is

Dr. Jane Lyons. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Angel Pierce at (909) 262-5088, Angel.Pierce@waldenu.edu or Dr. Jane Lyons at (740) 707-8039, Jane.Lyons@waldenu.edu. The Walden University Research Representative is Dr. Leilani Endicott, you may contact her at 1-800-925-3368 extension 3121210 or email at IRB@waldenu.edu if you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant in this study. Walden University's approval number for this study is **08-31-15-0077933** and it expires on **August 30, 2016**.

The researcher will give you a copy of this form to keep.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By signing below, I am agreeing to the terms described above.

Printed Name of Participant

Signature

Date

Signature of Researcher

Date

**Appendix B: Letter to Participant**

Date:

Name of Participant

Address

Dear (Name),

My name is Angel Pierce and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on the experiences of married individuals who participate in the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP). There are a vast number of studies detailing the potential effects of participation in PREP. What is not known, however, is the experience of the married individuals who participate in this program. This research will provide insight into what these individuals experience when they participate in PREP.

I realize that your time is important to you and I appreciate your consideration to participate in this study. In order to fully understand your experience we need to meet once for approximately 1 hour. The meeting will be held at a safe and private room located at a local public library. You will not be asked to do anything that you do not feel comfortable doing. The meeting is designed to simply get to know you and learn about your experience as a participant in PREP. All information gathered during our meeting will be kept strictly confidential.

Please contact me at your earliest convenience to schedule a date and time that we can meet. My telephone number is (909) 262-5088. You can also email me at [angel.pierce@waldenu.edu](mailto:angel.pierce@waldenu.edu). I look forward to hearing from you.

Angel Pierce

Doctoral Candidate

Walden University





Appendix C: Letter to Abundant Living Family Church

Pastor Kenny Perdue

Abundant Living Family Church

Civic Center Drive, Rancho Cucamonga, CA 91730

Dear Pastor Kenny Perdue,

My name is Angel Pierce and I am a doctoral candidate at Walden University. I am conducting dissertation research on the perceived impact of Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP) on marital satisfaction. There are many studies available that detail the effects of PREP on marriages. What is not known, however, is the personal experience of the married individuals. This research will provide insight into what married individuals experience during their participation in PREP and how they report marital satisfaction.

In order to conduct this research, I need your assistance in emailing PREP participants who had participated at your facility within the last year with an informative letter attached to the email which will include all of my contact information. The participants will be free to determine whether or not they are interested in participating in this study. They will also have the option of concluding participation at any time. All information provided by the participants will be kept strictly confidential.

Please feel free to call me to discuss any questions you may have concerning this study and your role in identifying research participants. I can be reached at (909) 262-5088 or emailed at [angel.pierce@waldenu.edu](mailto:angel.pierce@waldenu.edu).

Sincerely,

Angel Pierce

Doctoral Candidate, Walden University

## Appendix D: Interview Questions

Date

Location: Abundant Living Family Church

Interviewer: Angel Pierce

Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Interview Number: One

1. What led you to participating in PREP?
2. Have you ever participated in counseling in the past?
3. Give examples of tools/strategies that you learned during your participation in PREP.
4. How might you use these tools/strategies in your marriage when difficult situations arise?
5. Describe your feelings of support and understanding while participating in PREP.
6. What are some things that happened during your participation in PREP that made you feel supported and understood?
7. What could have been done while in PREP that would have made you feel more supported and understood?
8. Define and describe what marital satisfaction is to you.
9. How has your participation in PREP contributed to your ideals of marital satisfaction?
10. How has your participation in PREP challenged your ideals of marital satisfaction?

## Appendix E: Letter of Cooperation



vision: seek the lost, teach the found, send the disciples

### Appendix A: Letter of Cooperation

Abundant Living Family Church

Pastor Kenny Perdue

July 12, 2015

Dear Mrs. Pierce,

Based on my review of your research proposal, I give permission for you to conduct the study entitled "The Experience Of Married Individuals Who Participate In The Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP): Perceived Impact On Marital Satisfaction" within the Abundant Living Family Church. As part of this study, I authorize you to conduct one individual interview with each of the 10 past participants in PREP. Individuals' participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. We understand that our organization's responsibility includes: contacting through email potential participants by providing them with an attached letter describing the study and the researcher's contact information. We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve participation in this study.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential between the participant and the researcher and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Pastor Kenneth J. Perdue